



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 17, 2020
ACTS 17:22-31; PSALM 66:7-18; 1 PETER 3:13-22; JOHN 14:15-21

RECEIVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

John 14:15-21 [*Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”*]

What is God’s face like? That was the question posed in a 2018 psychology of religion study out of UNC Chapel Hill. A diverse group of over 500 Americans were asked to look at multiple pairs of photos and for each pair choose the one that looked more like God’s face to them.

As each person went along, certain features like eye shape, skin color, and facial expression were changed slightly to produce an optimal photo. All of these optimal

photos were then averaged together to generate one composite face of God. The same 500 people then went through the process a second time to produce an image for “anti-God,” the opposite of God.

Then, a new group of participants looked at the photos and described what they saw. The composite photo of God looked like a youngish, white man with sparkly eyes and a slight smile. One reviewer described him as “the prototypical lifeguard who is kind,

warm, always looking out for the little guy, and never forgets to reapply his sunscreen.”¹ The composite photo of the anti-God was described as having darker skin and eyes; in addition, he was perceived as less masculine, less intelligent, and less loving.

Huh. What does that say?

There’s more. Because the real aim of the study was not to generate a definitive image of God, but to discover how believers perceive God’s *mind*. Because the way humans form impressions of each other, imagining their thoughts and intentions, is by examining faces. When the study subjects described the God photo and the anti-God photo, they were revealing how they interpret the inner person based on their facial features. The study hoped to discover some of the psychology and biases behind why one person might see God differently than someone else.

What they concluded is this: people tend to believe in a God who looks like them and whose mind is suited to meet their needs.²

¹ <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/6/15/17455756/face-of-god-study-plosone-psychology-religion>

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/face-god-eye-beholder-researchers-say-n882491>

People’s images of God tended to parallel their own age and race, and when asked to describe God’s internal attributes, they also mirrored their own values around authority, judgement, and tolerance.

The study’s leader called this “ego-centric bias,” saying, “People often project their beliefs and traits onto others and God is no different. When we think of any mind that we don’t know about, we usually start with our own mind, and then we adjust for that.”³

So even while we might profess that God is unknowable, ineffable, beyond all human understanding, we also likely harbor the idea that God looks and thinks pretty much like us, except more perfect. We make God in our image.

Now, before we think this is unique to our post-modern, secular culture, we hear the first reading today. The apostle Paul is traveling with Silas and others in Greece, planting and nurturing communities of faith who seek to follow Jesus’ way. In Athens, Paul widely proclaims the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. He debates with philosophers who scoff at him, calling him a

³ <http://science.unctv.org/content/scienceblog/God>

“babblers”. But they are intrigued, too, so they put Paul in front of the judicial council at the Areopagus to explain himself.

So, it’s a high-stakes situation for Paul when he announces, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are. You worship gods – even unknown ones – the way you would want to be honored, with shrines and images of gold, all fashioned by mortal imagination. But that is not what the God who created all things needs. That is not why we are given life and breath.

No, God gives us our existence so that we will seek God unceasingly, even groping and fumbling, finding our way to the One who is not far, the One in whom we live and move and have our being.”

What a stunning assertion. God is “the One in whom we live and move and have our being.” Paul gets this from a 6th century BCE poet, and he offers it to his listeners as a wake-up call. This is not God made in the image of humankind, housed in an ornate temple with static age and facial expression. It evokes an experience of expansiveness, a force of energy, creativity, and change. Who knows what *that* looks like?

I think Jesus knew.

When Philip says to him, “Show us the Father,” Jesus replies “I am in the Father and the Father is in me. When you see me, when you are in relationship with me, you know God.” Not because God looks like Jesus, but because Godself is revealed in how Jesus lives and moves in the world. The disciples don’t understand this until much later, of course, and in today’s gospel, we hear Jesus breaking it down for them.

When you love me, he says, you keep my commandments: love God and love your neighbor. You won’t be alone in this; I’m not abandoning you. You will receive the Holy Spirit, literally the “Paraclete,” the one who comes alongside you, who abides with you, who is your Advocate and Guide and Helper.”

Jesus says, “Then you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” We will live and move and have our being together, and you will show that in the way you love.

I imagine that is deeply comforting to the disciples, but they also know the spirit of God is not tame. In scripture, it manifests as fierce wind and fire that pulls order and goodness out of chaos. A spirit of power, justice, and truth.

To put it in human terms, one theologian says “a *paraclete* is the one whose name you call when you are hauled into court on false charges, when the school bully is beating you up on the playground, [or] when you wake up from a bad dream in the middle of the night.”⁴

In this time of pandemic, I trust that the Holy Spirit is our Guide and Advocate, too. And I trust that will be true in the post-pandemic world. I do. But I don’t think the Advocate will guide us by simply affirming our mortal imaginations of what comes next.

God’s longed-for future is not made in our image or in the image of the past.

We use so many “re-” words these days; I mean words with the prefix “re,” which means “back”. We want to re-open the economy, re-sume our daily lives, re-turn to normal, as if there is a way to back up in time and erase all that has happened the last several months. As if the pain of lost lives and jobs and security will be wiped away by the ability to sit in a restaurant again or get a professional haircut.

But there is no going back. And that might be good news.

What if this is the moment to co-create a future not based on how we’ve lived before but on how God desires us to live? One where our minds don’t interpret others more favorably if they resemble us. One where black men can jog in safety and immigrants can go to the ER without fear of deportation and where no child in Seattle is hungry. A future where we keep Jesus’ commandments to love God and neighbor.

God’s longed-for future won’t come by starting with our own minds and then making adjustments. We must desire for our minds and our hearts to change and grow as we continually seek the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

So how about we begin by focusing on other “re-” words: reverence, resilience, resurrection. And pray, “Come Holy Spirit and renew the face of the earth.”

Amen.

⁴ Jay Johnson.