

# What is Your Image of God?

Sermon by Joseph Easley 8-4-19 @ Eastminster Presbyterian Church

Text: 1 John 4:7-21

“What is your image of God?” Last November the Washington Post “Acts of Faith” editors asked that question. Since people of many different faiths and no faith read their column, they worded the question even more broadly: “What is your image of God, or whatever you would characterize as a higher power you look to?”

10 days ago Editor Michelle Boorstein shared some of the responses, during what she called “a relatively slow news week and brutal heat”. The few answers she quoted certainly illustrated a diverse audience.

One said: *“I am an atheist who wishes he weren’t but sees no way around it. Nevertheless, I do have a conception of God, although I’d never use that word: The Best That Is Within Us. I can’t accept the idea of a still-living creator who allows the innocent to be harmed...But I can easily accept the idea of each one of us containing a god.”*

Another offered: *“He is a loving father who is never tired of loving you.”*

A third said, *“A higher power (spirit) that is found inside each being and connected to all. Awe, reverence, amazement and Love most important. It is defined from a mystical experience and not from knowledge.”*

A fourth said: *“God is in all of us. He is our consciousness, our intellect, our empathy and our morals. God is in the plants and animals that we share life with. God is all that makes us sentient beings. When we pray to God we are praying that we can do what is right for ourselves & for all others in the world.”*

A fifth relayed, *“I think God is my conscience. And I think this vision of God applies to all my brothers and sisters around the world.”*

Finally one replied simply: *“Presence. Vibration. Pure Potential.”*

Do you resonate with any of those? If you would add your own, what would it be? Obviously, the question is not settled by a compilation or majority vote. However, I think our image of God matters. How we think about God makes quite a difference.

Likely, our image of God has evolved over our years—and it should! As Paul wrote in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians: *“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”*

One of those early images for me—and probably a lot of us—was: An old man with a white beard sitting on a throne in the sky, at times shooting down lightening bolts on those who upset him.

That image is based more on Roman mythology than Christian theology. Zeus was the name of the chief God of the Romans. You change the first letter of “Zeus” & get “Deus”, the Latin word for God. The throne and angry arrows of judgment are quite appropriate for Zeus, but too much of that seemed to carry over to the concept of “Deus”, even after Christianity superseded pagan faith.

Again, how we conceive God is important to our faith and practice, and that is a concept of God that I thoroughly reject.

I use the term “image of God”, because we do not perceive God directly. The Hebrew Bible consistently says people cannot look upon God. If God is the ultimate source of all that is, God is beyond the human realm. Human categories cannot “capture” God in pictures, word or phrases. While we necessarily use human words and concepts to talk about God, so we can express ourselves & communicate with each other—which is helpful—all of these are ultimately metaphors, not descriptions or definitions.

The Bible’s first 5 books contains more than a dozen different names for God—each related to how God was experienced by a particular person in a given situation. As you continue through the Bible many different similes or metaphors are used to describe God—especially in the poetry

of the Psalms. Likewise the Prophets' poetry used different images, including feminine ones.

That variety is good. It frees us up in our communication with God. It reminds us that faith is more about relationship than simply concepts. It is more important to speak with God, using our best personal language, than it is to simply talk about God in categories of human reasoning.

But language about God affects our practice of faith, so where do we turn? For Christians, we turn to Jesus.

The opening of John's Gospel says of him: "*In the beginning was the Word*"—this Greek word 'logos' might better be translated 'expression' or 'pattern'—"*and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" That suggests that when we see Jesus, we see what God is like. Later in in that chapter John says, "*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*" This opening prologue of the Gospel comes to it conclusion in verse 18 with: "*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*"

We believe Christ is the incarnation of God—the Divine in flesh—so we learn about the nature of God from Jesus in his 1st century life. What we see in Jesus is not an angry being on a throne eager to throw bolts, but a humble spirit, born without power and prestige, who stoops down to human need, who cares and heals, who brought good news to his world. If this is what Jesus is like, then so is God! Unlike Zeus our God is tender and compassionate, like Jesus.

We believe the end of Jesus' life is a powerful word from God, which tells us both about God's nature and God's intention for humanity. For Paul—and others—the Gospel was: "*Jesus Christ crucified & risen*". For Christians it is both God's supreme revelation & our redeeming. Christians have agreed this is the Gospel's basic truth, but over the ages many difference theologies have sought to explain the "atonement".

Some thought Jesus' death was because there was a price to pay for sin—and indeed from our human perspective sin does have a price in how our own sins can distort our lives and others sins can be destructive to us. Not surprisingly many of those have involved the concept of sacrifice. Sacrifice was part of the religious devotion of both the world of Israel in the 1st millennium BC & in the Greco-Roman world 1st century AD. The “sacrifice” was to appease God's anger or court god's favor—or both.

So if Jesus was making a sacrifice, to whom was he offering it and why? A number of theologians in the first millennium said it was to the Devil. In that view fallen humanity had to be ransomed from Satan, who had won control of our fate by our sin.

In the 11th century, Anselm came up with a different theory, which has held sway in much popular Catholic and Protestant theology since. Anselm said it was in fact God who had had to be appeased. God, being just, could not let the sins of humankind go without some transaction to satisfy the requirements of justice, so Jesus became the sacrifice to meet the price of God.

This seems even worse than Jesus's death being a ransom required by the devil, if the thought is that he had to die to appease God. This obviously splits God apart: God the Son died to pay the price for human sin that justice required, so God the Father would not have to hold that sin eternally against us. This would give us on the one hand the Son, who forgave those who crucified him; on the other hand, the Father who couldn't forgive without the Son's death. **I think not!**

Indeed something astonishing **is** happening at Calvary, but it is not a payoff. Rather the love with which Jesus accepted death is also the Father's love. It is not that Jesus gains for us atonement from the God's grudging hands. Rather the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit work together inseparably in this to bring “at-one-ment” between God and creation, as was always God's desire.

Christian theology at its best has long said the cross was all about mercy. I like what Fr. Richard Rohr says about this: *“Jesus didn’t die to change God’s mind about humanity; Jesus died to change humanity’s mind about God.”*

The solution to both our initial question and the conundrum about the cross is found beautifully in today’s scripture. I have often looked to this passage from 1<sup>st</sup> John 4 for its marvelous insight on how followers of Jesus are to live with our fellows in the church & world, but perhaps even more magnificent is what it says about God. It is this truth of God’s nature that becomes the basis of why & how we follow Jesus.

John begins: *7Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*  
*8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

If you want a Christian image for God, this is it! God does not just do love, at the heart of everything the God is love. Love is not one aspect of deity, but is the defining essence of the Divine.

The author goes on to say: *9God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.*  
*10In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

The cross reveals the motive of love in both the Father and the Son, since they are one God with the Holy Spirit.

We are then invited and empowered to live in this same manner as God:  
*11Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*

God empowers us to live this way—even more this opens us to God’s presence: *12No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.* *13By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*

In vs. 16 John reminds his readers of what they know & reiterates its impact: *16So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.*

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

John continues to explain how love shapes us over time and expels its opposite: <sup>18</sup>*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...*

This is all based on the Divine nature and God's action from beginning to end, but it also takes hold in us, as he powerfully & succinctly declares in verse 19: <sup>19</sup>*We love because he first loved us.*

You see, God loves all creation, every creature, every person, you and me! The essence of God is this unlimited, unending love. What if we took this as our image of God? Seeing God as so much defined by Love that we can also say "God Is Love".

What difference would it make if we accepted as true that God loves us? God loved us, loves us, and will love us. As someone has said: *"There is nothing you can do to make God love you more; and there is nothing you can do to make God love you less."*

Here is where the metaphor of the parent comes in for God. How does a good mother or father love their children? They always want to best for their children and want to elicit the best from their children. God's love is like parents' at their best—and even more so, without limit. Love like this is the most freeing and empowering thing anyone can have. We are all children of God, and God always want the best for each of us.

God loves you—as you are, and without qualification! Let that sink in as you receive the signs of God's love in the bread & wine.

As you join with sisters and brothers in this Eucharist (i.e. "Thanksgiving"), remember that God also loves every person here in the same way.

As you go forth from worship to serve and live for God, remember that everyone you meet is loved by God & is of infinite worth.

Finally remember, the love God give you makes you able to love others too.