

God's Love Made Visible

(The title comes from a hymn by Dave and Iola Brubeck)

John 4:7-21

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What does God look like? You may have heard about the little girl in Sunday School who was busy with her crayons. “What are you drawing?” the teacher asked. “I’m drawing a picture of God.” “That’s nice, honey, but no one knows what God looks like.” “They will when I get done!”

In John’s gospel and again in the first letter of John, the scripture says, “No one has ever seen God.” Of course it’s a set-up. No one has ever seen God (until now) but... At the conclusion of the prologue to the gospel (1:18 NRSV) John says, “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.” You can’t see God, but Jesus has revealed God’s nature and God’s heart. In 1 John 4:12 (NLT), it says, “No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.” So God is still in some sense invisible, but we do in fact know what he looks like. God looks like Jesus, first of all. And God looks like the love that we act out toward each other. If we fail to act in love, we no longer resemble God and we no longer bear the image of God.

I’ve had kids give me pictures which they said was a picture of God, and it turned out to be a drawing of Jesus. I was tempted to say, “Well, that’s actually a picture of Jesus, not God, because God is invisible.” I have worried a little that kids don’t get the difference between Jesus and God, even though I wouldn’t say anything to hurt the child’s feelings. But the New Testament suggests at several points that the kids have more of the truth than I do. Colossians 1:15 says that Jesus “*is* the image of the invisible God.” He is the *eikon* in Greek. Hebrews 1:3 (NRSV) says that “He is the exact imprint of God’s very being.” That word imprint means a stamp or a copy, even what we would call an engraving—as close as they came to a photograph in the first century. Christ is a photograph of God. So maybe the kids are right to draw me a picture of God that looks just like Jesus. Maybe Jesus meant it when he said “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

If someone shows up at your front door claiming to be God, be sure to ask for a photo ID. If he doesn’t look like Jesus, turn him away, because he’s not God.

Some of us have one image of God and another image of Jesus. As Mike Royko once put it, “Jesus is a Democrat and God is a Republican.” Sometimes the way we talk about what Jesus did for us on the cross we make it sound like Jesus is the solution to the problem of God. The problem in the human story, we assume, is the anger of God, and the solution to that anger is Jesus, who gets us, who convinces his Father to back off. That is not the gospel. That is not the truth. The truth that Christmas shows us is that whatever we may have thought about God in the past, whatever we projected onto God of our own values and philosophies, God let us know what he is really like when he became a human being.

What we find out about God when we look at Jesus is that God is not angry with us as we had assumed. Maybe we deserve for him to be mad at us, but it turns out that Jesus is a friend of sinners—which means that God is, too. It turns out, as First John says, that God is love. God is

not anger. God is not defined by his power or his purity or his knowledge. God is defined by love.

You have to wonder if we believe that, given all the things we attribute to God. If some natural disaster is really awful, the insurance companies call it “an act of God.” They would have a harder time calling it “an act of Jesus,” because everybody knows Jesus is kind, but God not so much. God is not Jesus’ bully older brother. God is not the bad cop to Jesus’ good cop. God is love.

So what is love, then? First John says “This is what love is: not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Love is defined not by our feelings or spiritual impulses, but by God’s action in becoming a human being in Jesus, in metaphorical terms, “sending his Son.” It’s the message of John 3:16. Say it with me (in the King James) if you know it: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have everlasting life.” The whole point of Christmas is that God loved the world so much that he sent his own essence into this world in human form in order to share his own eternal life with us. He sent his Son, First John says, to be a sacrifice, for the purpose of atoning for our sins. Atoning means that the sacrifice makes us “at-one” with God. The reason God came as baby Jesus and humbled himself on a cross was that God wanted to reconcile the human race to himself. God is not wrath that seeks to punish; God is love that reconciles the unrighteous. God is forgiving love that takes the initiative with enemies.

Is it possible that you are afraid of God? People tell me all the time, joking, that if they came into the church the roof would fall in. People apologize when they use profanity around me as if they don’t want to get God mad and be struck by lightning. There is such a thing in the Bible as a good fear of God, but that means something like being in awe of God and wanting to do what pleases God. But Jesus says that the great commandment of the Bible is not to fear God but to love God. In fact, First John adds, “There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear.” We do not have to be afraid of God, because we know that God has revealed himself in Jesus and shown that he loves us. You see, the Christian message is not, “God is mad at you, unless you believe that he’s not, and then he’ll forgive you.” The Christian message is “In the story of Jesus and his death and resurrection we have discovered that God is absolutely *for* us and has forgiven us and wants us to share his life forever. We have discovered *love* in Jesus and in our experiences with other people who love him.”

That’s what Christmas is all about, and what we ought to be telling our neighbors. Christmas is about who God is. God is love that makes itself vulnerable for the sake of others. God is a person who identifies with the poor and the weak and the outcast and the rebel. God is in many ways the opposite of what you think. Jesus shows us that God is not a hard ass, God is not a nun with a ruler, God is not a bigot, God is not a dictator, God is not a policeman. God is not about catching us breaking rules or having fun. God is love.

“If you have seen me,” Jesus says, “you have seen God.” Jesus says “I and the Father are one.” Jesus says, “I am the truth”—the truth about God, the truth about life. In the middle of the last century the allegedly “liberal” theologian Paul Tillich tried to make this clear in a sermon:

The truth of which Jesus speaks is not a doctrine but a reality, namely, He Himself:

"I am the truth." This is a profound transformation of the ordinary meaning of truth. For us, statements are true or false; people may *have* truth or not; but how can they *be* truth, even *the* truth? The truth of which the Fourth Gospel speaks is a true reality—that reality which does not deceive us if we accept it and live with it. If Jesus says, *"I am the truth,"* he indicates that in Him the true, the genuine, the ultimate reality is present; or, in other

words, that God is present, unveiled, undistorted, in His infinite depth, in His unapproachable mystery. Jesus is not the truth because His teachings are true. But His teachings are true because they express the truth which He Himself is. He is more than His words. And He is more than any word said about Him. [Paul Tillich, *The New Being*, Scribners, 1955]

God loved us, and that is why he became one of us in Jesus. Do you remember the play *Green Pastures*, which presented the theology of African-Americans on Broadway for many years? You may have seen the movie. In one scene the Lord is anxiously looking out over the parapets of heaven, trying to decide what to do with the sinful situation on earth. Gabriel enters with his horn tucked under his arm. Sensing the Lord's dilemma, he brushes his lips across the trumpet to keep the feel of it and asks, "Lord, has the time come for me to blow the trumpet?" "No, no," said the Lord, "don't touch the trumpet, not yet." God continues to worry with the problem. Gabriel asks the Lord again what he plans to do. Will he send someone to tend to the situation? Who will it be? Gabriel makes some suggestions. "How about another David or Moses? You could send one of the prophets: Isaiah or Jeremiah. There are lots of great prophets up here. What do you think, Lord?" Without looking back at Gabriel, God said, "I am not going to send anyone. This time I am going myself!!"

Paul Harvey used to tell the story every year on radio about a skeptical man who, as his family got ready to go to the Christmas Eve service said, "You go on without me. Since I don't really believe that whole story about God becoming a man, I'll just stay home." The family left and he sat down to read the paper and enjoy the warmth from the fireplace. Then he heard a thump on the window. It wasn't long before he heard another thump and he went to see what was going on. He saw birds, looking for refuge from the snow, who kept flying into the window. He had compassion for them and went out to open the doors to his barn, hoping they would find refuge in it. But they would not go inside. So he turned on the light. The birds still wouldn't go in. He tried to shoo them in, and the more he tried, the more frightened and distant they became. Finally he said to himself, *I need to let these birds know that I want to save them. I want to get them out of danger and into safety. If I could just become a bird for a moment...* About that time, he heard the church bells ring, and as he heard them ring he thought about God becoming a man, and he knelt in the snow.