

**Luke 4:21-30; RIC Sunday; 4 Epiphany; January 30, 2022**  
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Grace to you and peace from God our parent, Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Today I want to talk about the nature of God. So first a disclaimer, I have not studied this, I have not taken classes on this, this is what I've pieced together and have learned over the years as I've grown as a person and as a Christian. It is what I have learned from many sermons from many great pastors, especially Pastor Ellen. And mostly from what I have grown to feel deeply within myself as to who God really is. While I certainly enjoy hearing and learning about the historical and academic details behind Bible passages, sometimes it helps to go with what speaks to my heart and soul instead of just what speaks to my brain.

If you would have asked me years ago the question "Who is God?" I would have probably answered that He is the creator of all, and if asked to describe Him I would have said an old white guy with white hair and a beard. You know, like God is often depicted in movies and art, at least in our American society. I would have also said that the Old Testament God was an angry, revengeful God who stuck to rules and punished people who were bad and that He had a change of heart with the New Testament and Jesus and turned into a God that was forgiving and loving.

I'm so glad that with what I've learned over the years, and continue to still learn, that my image and thoughts about God have grown, expanded, and changed. Thinking back now to my first thoughts, I can easily see how narrow and short sighted, and in some cases nonsensical this image of God was. With descriptions like that, God is clearly being placed inside a very small box designed to use God for certain purposes.

So - how would I describe God now? To put it very simply, I personally believe that God is Love. Not that God loves or that God is expressed and seen through Love, but God themselves is Love. The very nature of Love is what God is. When I think about what it means to feel close to God or to be part of God's kin-dom, it is to feel wholeness and completeness - the feeling that I would describe as Love. Similarly, if I was ever asked to describe what Hell is - it wouldn't be a place or an idea, it is what is missing, and what is missing is God slash Love. The absence of God is hell. So when we take actions that prevent people from feeling love and wholeness, we are taking God away from them; likewise when we act in ways that bring Love and wholeness to people, that is sharing God with them. That is what we are called to do - bring this wholeness to all of God's people and all of God's creation.

When looking at today's Old Testament reading, I think the introduction provided gives a good summary of what the passage from Jeramiah tells us:

*God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet and consecrates him in the womb.*

*Jeremiah's task is to preach God's word amid the difficult political realities of his time,*

*before the Babylonian exile. He is to make God known not only to Judah, but also to the nations.*

First, it gives a good reminder that God calls us from when we are in the womb. We don't need to wait until we are educated or have just the right job or situation, God knows us in the womb and that we have been created to do good and share God's Love, in our own unique ways, with others.

When thinking about this I was reminded of the song "Mother's Womb" from the album *A Heartland Liturgy* by Jonathan Rundman. This is based on Psalm 139, and the start of the chorus of this song goes "Lord you knew me in my mother's womb, I am fearfully and wonderfully made". I encourage you to find Joanthan's music on his Bandcamp website and listen to the full song

(<https://jonathanrundman.bandcamp.com/track/mothers-womb>) it is a good reminder that we are made by God, that we are wonderful, and God knows all about us before we are born.

This starts to break down one of my old thoughts of an Old Testament God of being revengeful and angry - how can God be angry and want to take revenge on someone they made in their own image?

The last part of the introduction to the reading from Jerimiah starts to break down the rest of what I originally thought of an Old Testament God of being all about rule following

and being only for the chosen people. From the introduction, *“He is to make God known not only to Judah, but also to the nations.”* Jeremiah wasn’t just called to share God’s message with his own people, but with “the others”. While often we think of the New Testament God as being where God’s love started being shared with people outside the “chosen ones”, it is right here in the Old Testament that God’s love is for all people.

Coming to realize this helps me make more sense of God - because when I would think back on having an “Old Testament God” and a “New Testament God” as if God suddenly had a change of heart on how to govern the universe, it wouldn’t really make sense. If God is all knowing and is beyond the concept of time - how and why would God suddenly change part way through history. It makes much more sense when we realize that God has never changed, God has always been for all people for all time.

This takes us to today’s Gospel from Luke. Jesus is sharing the Good News with his hometown that through Jesus, the word of God about the oppressed being freed, is coming true. Again, if we turn to the introduction to the Gospel in our bulletins, we get a nice summary:

*People in Jesus’ hometown are initially pleased when he says that God will free the oppressed. Their pleasure turns to rage when he reminds them that God’s prophetic mission typically pushes beyond human boundaries so that mercy and healing are extended to those regarded as outsiders.*

Yes, things were the same back in Jesus's day as they tend to be now. People want things for themselves and get upset when they find they have to share with or give to others.

Oh - it's good that you are getting funding for road projects - but make sure our local roads get fixed before other people get their roads fixed. Yes, there are hungry people around the world, but why should we feed hungry people in other countries before we feed the hungry in our own country? Why should we take refugees into our country when we have people here we need to help first? I think making a donation from the church budget to help a mission elsewhere is great, but shouldn't we make sure we pay our own bills for our own congregation first?

Yes - it happens time and time again, and I'm sure I've said it or have certainly thought of it many times. The simple thought of "Why should we help or provide for others when we should help our own people first." We have been taught to always think about our own group - whether that be based on membership (church, club, etc.), geographical region (city, state, country), demographic make up (gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.) - our own group first before we help the "other" - as if just because we are part of a group we are more deserving than someone on the outside - yes an outside that simply exists because of artificial boundaries that are completely self created.

When the crowd around Jesus hears the good news of the oppressed being set free, they basically respond with “Yipeee! This is great news! Now remember where you are from - your hometown - we deserve all this, while the others don’t. This is something for us and not them.” Jesus then basically responds with “not so fast - this is good news for all people - even those you consider others” He reminds them that even in the old testament the prophets often shared the good news and deeds not with the “hometown crowd” but with the “others” and that Jesus plans on doing the exact same.

Then, as is typical now, as soon as someone dares challenge the artificial boundaries of the in vs. the out, they turn on Jesus, run him out of town and try to kill him. They suddenly shift from excitement over great news, when they thought it was all for themselves, to anger, when they realize that they have to share the good news with others. How often do we do this ourselves - where we are only excited over good news when it applies to us personally or our “in-crowd” and it turns to disappointment or even anger when we find out it applies to others.

This is who God is, has been, and always will be - one who wants the good news for all people, where there are no artificial human-created boundaries. Because when we remove all the boundaries, we get wholeness and completeness - what I describe as the feeling of Love - which is what I say God is. God removes the boundaries because God themselves is boundless. We, as people, have always just never gotten it, through the Old Testaments and the prophets, and when we still didn’t get it, God sent Jesus to

live by example of what it means, and yet we still didn't get it. So, thankful that also through Jesus we were reminded and shown that God is a forgiving God, so as we continue to try over and over again to remove the boundaries, God forgives us when we continue to create these boundaries and try to reserve the Good News for "us" and not "them."

With my personal belief that God is love, I have to touch briefly on our 1 Corinthians reading - the very famous "Love passage." One thing I learned about this passage for today, is that this passage wasn't written about individual love between a committed couple - even though that is how this passage is most often used during weddings. As Pastor Ellen shared in her notes for the weekly Tuesday Bible study.

*Paul's emphasis on unity within the body of Christ has its apex in this much quoted praise of the loving spirit that ought to characterize the Christian community. Despite its popularity as a reading at weddings, Paul is describing not a bonded couple, but the whole community in Christ.*

And continuing

*Leading up to this chapter, Paul has pointed out that the members of the church in Corinth are not acting very charitably toward one another, and are in fact continuing to live according to the social class system of their secular surroundings. Rather than approaching the Lord's Supper in a spirit of unity and love, they have fallen into factions of "haves" and "have-nots." (1 Cor 11:20-22) Rather than using their spiritual gifts for the growth and benefit of all, they appear to have created a hierarchy of "bragging rights"*

*according to who can exercise which gift. (1 Cor 12) Paul's purpose in Chapter 13 is to remind them that they are no longer to act as individuals, thinking of themselves first, but to recognize that they are now part of the body of Christ. In the unity of that body, all are to be treated with equal respect and the gifts of all are to be received in love and gratitude.*

So, yet again, here is an example where we are reminded that God's love is to serve the purpose of bringing unity and wholeness and to break down any artificially created boundaries dividing us. Sometime, if you want - go back and read this passage but substitute "God" for "Love" and see how it reads. I think it fits very well with my belief that God is Love.

As I close out this message about my thoughts on the image of God, I want to remind you that we cannot know for certain exactly what the image of God is, but we certainly get a glimpse of it each time we look at ourselves. So often we try to make God in our image (remember the old white guy that I often thought of - that image was created by white men - so God looked like a white man), but as the theme of this year's RIC Sunday reminds us - we are "Made in God's Image: God's Boundless Diversity". So if you are female, because you are made in God's image - God is female. If you are transgender - God is transgender. If you are asexual - God is asexual. If you use other senses more than your vision because you are blind, God uses those other senses more. If you are black, God is black. God is all things and beyond all things - there is no



way to describe God because of the enormity of who God is. Whoever you are, God is, because you are made in God's image. And because God is love, and you are made in God's image - you are Love and are Loved. Amen.