

**How do we see God?**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 15, 2015.

*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*  
*John 3:17*

When we were small children, we wondered what God is like. The creation stories in the Book of Genesis tell us that we are made in the image of God. From that, we might conclude that God must look like us with a human face complete with two eyes and ears, a nose and mouth. Being made in the image of God really refers to God's intent for us rather than any physical resemblance to us.

A painting entitled *The Adoration of the Trinity* by the 16th century German artist Albrecht Durer portrays God as a kindly and beneficent old man with a long white beard wearing magnificent robes and a gold crown. The reality is that God is above human description and is not bound by human limitations including gender. The limitations of our human mind and language cause us to refer to God in human terms. We speak of the mind of God, the eyes of God, and the face, mouth, heart and arms of God. The question is how and where do we see God in our midst?

Our images of God involve a myriad of forms. One of the ways we can recognize the presence of God is in other people. I see God in ordinary people who do extraordinary things. I see God in people who are kind and don't have to draw attention to themselves or dominate conversations. I see God both in those who affirm me and accept who I am as well as those who challenge me to grow. I see God in the face of street people who have little or nothing going for them who may only be able to see God in a hot meal or a warm blanket.

Saint Paul tells that we are what God made us and that we are created for doing good works. We only have to take a look around to see where and how we can be a force for good. The key is in knowing how to use our resources in the right way. God has a way of encouraging us to develop our best strengths. Once we discover what we do best, we develop our strengths and skills to the fullest for the benefit of others. There is no end to what we can do. What we give to others, we give to Christ and what we withhold from others, we withhold from him.

All of us begin life with a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate on which we write the story of our life. We all have been given certain abilities and talents to use in writing our story that expresses who we are and how we use our core values. When we look at our lives thus far, we may find that we aren't what we envisioned. We didn't always do our best. We made mistakes. There were times when we could have done better. We've hurt people intentionally or unintentionally. We've succumbed to temptations. We have broken our promises and have let people down.

In Christ, our failures and shortcomings are redeemed and we are given value and worth to become better at who we are and what we do. We must strive for wholeness and integrity by being totally authentic and transparent to be true to what God intends for us. So, how we see God depends largely on how we see ourselves. If we get it right, we will glorify God while never trying to take God's place in the universe.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so are lifted up with Christ with the conviction that he is the source of our forgiveness and salvation. The cross need not be looked upon as a ghastly symbol of death. It is more as a sign that love overcomes hatred; truth overcomes falsehood, and good over evil.

The Gospel today tells us that God did not come to us in Christ to condemn us but that we might be saved from being condemned. The difference between compassion and condemnation is the difference between a building inspector who posts a sign condemning a place as unfit for occupancy and the builder who sets about repairing and rebuilding it to make it useful.

Jesus is the light shining in the darkness to make us the people of light. The terrorists we see in the daily news wear masks to hide their identity because they are people of the evil. Those who commit random shootings in schools and malls eventually turn their weapon on themselves because they know what they are doing is wrong and don't want to have to face the consequences.

I don't have to tell you that non-belief is growing more persistently. It has become popular for people to declare themselves as atheists. Those who turn their back on God are often very good people who just don't believe that God is present in their lives. Something blocks them from having a sense of God's presence. Many of them would like to believe but can't bring themselves to feel anything. They are in a spiritual vacuum. I believe that it is only through the power of God's grace that a non-believer is restored to faith. It takes a spiritual unstopping of their ears and an opening of their mind to be awakened to a renewed faith and trust in the presence of God. For us it is important not to compromise ourselves nor apologize for what we believe. We must not diminish our identity as Christians just to appeal to secularism.

I once was with a group of evangelical Christians who were naming the time and place when they were saved. For them, it was a particular point when they declared themselves saved. They will tell you that they went from little or nothing of meaning to being saved from condemnation. My own experience has been a gradual process of growing spiritually with significant points of revelation along the way. Those life points happen when we bring into alignment who we really are and who we appear to be. Our true character is who we are when we are alone and no one is watching.

We have reached the mid-point in this Lenten season on this Laetare Sunday where we relax the austerity of Lent to enjoy who we are and what we have. This is a time to take stock of our resources that give us meaning. Ask yourself how you can use the gifts you have been given that make you a more effective channel for God's grace and mercy. What can you do to make a difference in the lives of others that will enable them to see the face of God in you?

That's an important question. You just might be surprised at the answer!