

Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman – March 23, 2025
Mark 15:33-39
Honoring God by Honoring the Full Humanity of Others

No one has ever seen God. So we don't know what God looks like. And, truth be told, we don't know what God *is* like. Which presents something of a problem if you want to – as, historically, human beings for obvious reasons have generally wanted to – stay on God's good side. How do you make sure you aren't doing anything that will make God mad at you if you don't even know who or what God is?

Say you wanted to – and no judgement: the market is down; these are uncertain times – say you wanted to suck up to God, suck up to God just a little. How do you make a Question Mark, a big Question Mark set against the whole of the cosmos, how do you make *that* happy? One of the ways that people have tried to figure out what God is like is to take a human being and picture God as the bigger, better opposite of that.

So, like: We are finite. We can only know so much. Calculus is hard. We forget our anniversaries. We lose our keys. But God knows everything there is to know. We can only do so much with our bodies. We can't be in two places at once. But God is everywhere. God can be here and be in Timbuktu, and heck, be on Mars, too, all at the same time.

Speaking of time, we only have so much of it. We grow old. We die. But God has all the time in the world – and then some. God is eternal. God exists outside of time, and so God is not affected in any way by the passing of time. God doesn't age. God doesn't die. God is immortal. We face obstacles we can't overcome. But God is all-powerful. God can do anything. We make mistakes and do things we shouldn't. But God is perfect, is good and moral and just and always right. We have mood swings; some of us have mood bungee jumps. We get angry. We get sad. Our emotions can get the best of us. But God doesn't have feelings, doesn't have feelings that come and go. Basically, if you want to know what God is like, take a human being and raise it to the nth degree. God is a *Supreme* Being. God is a *Higher* Power.

Now, there's definitely something to all of that. But, on the whole, we do it a little differently in Christianity. We take a human being – one, in particular; maybe you've heard of him? Jesus of Nazareth – we take a human being and say: God is like *this*. In all of this human being's human-being-ness, we see God. Instead of picturing God as above or beyond all the things that make us human, we try to imagine God as being in and within them.

God is not the opposite of what we are. God is the true depth of what we are. If you read the gospels, you will read stories about Jesus that could just as well be stories about any one of us: He has a complicated relationship with some members of his family. (Anybody want to say "amen" to that?) He sometimes feels misunderstood and lonely. He has fears. He loses people he loves and he misses them and mourns *hard*. He laughs. He cries. He gets tired. He struggles to break free of the narrow ways of thinking, of the prejudices even, that took shape within him unknowingly and simply by virtue of living in a particular time and place and being a part of the culture he was a part of. (You know: Jesus probably never tried Thai food or saw somebody who

had red hair; if Little Orphan Annie walked up to him with curry in hand, I think he could be forgiven for being unsure and maybe saying or doing the wrong thing.)

Jesus suffers. Jesus suffers and begs God to make it stop. Jesus suffers and begs God to make it stop – and God doesn't make it stop. Jesus prays prayers that go unanswered. Jesus believes that God has turned away from him in his hour of need. Jesus believes God has abandoned him. Jesus dies believing God abandoned him. He cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In Christianity, we say that the way to know what God is like – the *only* way to know what God is like – is to know what being human is like. The way, the only way, to know what God is like is to laugh, to cry, to lose someone, to have hopes, to have fears, to grow out of old ways of thinking, *to live*. The way, the only way, to know what God is like (and this is where it gets a little mind-bending!) is to pray prayers that go unanswered, to suffer, to believe God has abandoned you, to despair, and to *die*. Experiences of heartbreak and pain, experiences even of godforsakenness, are – if we have eyes to see – experiences of God.

We say this because the bible says this; the Gospel of John says: "No one has ever seen God, but it is the Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has had made him known." Jesus shows us what God is like. In his life and in his death, he shows us what God is like.

Nick Wolterstorff was for many years a philosopher at Yale. His 25-year-old son died, lost his footing and fell while mountain climbing in Europe. He wrote a little book called *Lament for a Son*. It's a gathering-together of fragmentary, random thoughts he had while grieving his son's death. There is more white space, more blank space, on each page than text, because, as he says, when someone you love dies, there aren't words, aren't good words for what you feel. There is silence.

Sometimes a healing silence that comes when people stop saying well-meaning but stupid things. Sometimes a terrible silence that comes when you would give anything to hear their laugh, hear their voice, again, but no. Anyway, in this book, he reflects on a line that is repeated throughout scripture: "No one can see God and live." He says that he had always believed that this meant that no one can see God's splendor and live; the majesty, the radiance, the glory of God would be so powerful that we would be entirely swallowed up by it. He goes on to say that, but now, he believes this means that no one can see God's sorrow and live.

Terrible pain and sadness and despair – an unfathomable, infinite depth of it – is a part of what and of who God is. God holds all the heartbreak in the world – yours and mine – holds all the heartbreak there ever was, holds it in his arms of love, holds it, in some sense, within himself. Jesus shows us *that*. His death shows us that. God feels what we feel, feels what we feel with us as we feel it. We are not alone, never alone as we go through whatever we go through. We might believe God has turned away from us. We might not have a sense of a presence, of God's presence with us in our hour of need; but even Jesus, himself God, did not have a sense God's presence with him in his. Pain dulls our senses. It throbs, it numbs, it demands we attend to it and only it. But there is always more. There is always God, even when there isn't. Jesus has been there. God has been there.

Those who conceive of God as the bigger, better opposite of a human being generally seem to think that the way to keep God happy is to hold “the correct” beliefs about him, to worship him, to praise the majesty, the radiance, and the glory of God. The way to God, for them, is upward. But for Christians who, in Jesus, see what is holy and what is human as two sides of the same coin, the way to God is inward and outward.

It is compassion, compassion for self and compassion for others, which most pleases God. And so mercy is a great Christian calling. Service as a way of life is a great Christian calling. I’ll come back to this on Easter Sunday, so act surprised (!): St. Irenaeus once said – and I think this about as true and as lovely as it gets – that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive.” We honor God by being fully alive, that is, by *really living*, by living deeply, by feeling deeply, by not wasting our one, precious life on what, in the end, won’t matter – the pursuit of status and stuff – but instead striving after what is worth striving after and doing what is worth doing and cherishing what is worth cherishing.

And we honor God by honoring the full humanity of others, by listening to them, by seeking to understand them, by forgiving them, by asking them to forgive us, and by helping them to be *truly alive*, especially when their lives have become great struggles against pain and suffering and death; we honor God by guarding their dignity when it is under threat, by praying for them, caring for them, practicing a ministry of presence – which is to say, simply showing up, being there, being there for them, being there for them in God’s name so they know that, even if it seems God has forgotten them, has forsaken them, we have not.