

So what is God like?

If you ask children and even some adults, they might tell you that God is an old man with a long white beard in a long white robe, sitting in a big chair somewhere up in the clouds. If you ask about Jesus, you might get a story about a little tiny baby sleeping in a manger. Or you might hear about a teacher and preacher who hung out with fisherman. If the question is about the Holy Spirit it's possible that the person answering may not really be able to define what the Spirit is all about. *It isn't a ghost or anything like that, they may tell you. It's different. Sometimes there are doves involved.*

None of those answers whether they are accurate or not, really answer the question of- **What is God like?**

+ + +

It isn't a question that I asked the confirmands. I didn't ask them to describe their understanding of God, but in choosing their memory verses – they gave three very fine answers.

Erin chose a verse from Deuteronomy. Fifth book in the Bible. End of the Torah. Deuteronomy is the book that Jesus quoted most frequently according to the gospel writers and he even quoted the verse that Erin picked. Deuteronomy 6:5 is part of the oldest daily prayer in Judaism. It is called the Shema and it is prayed every day in the morning and at night by faithful Jews around the world. It is one of only two prayers in the Torah that the people were commanded to pray.

*Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*

*Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.*

*Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever.*

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart  
and with all your soul and with all your might.*

It's a part of Moses' last big speech before the people left the wilderness and entered the promised land. And this verse is where the law meets the Gospel, which must have sounded wonderful to the Israelites. They were invited not to be afraid of the God they had seen in lightning and heard in thunder when God talked to Moses. They weren't told that the most important thing was to avoid making God mad, or they might be squashed like bugs. They were told to love God because loving God was the most important thing they could do and they should give that love with the very best parts of themselves: with their heart – which for them was the place not just of emotion but of decision making. Love God with your whole heart. And love God with your whole soul. With the part of you that is eternal and everlasting. Give that to God. Finally love God with all your might. May your affection for God come from a place of strength and not a place of weakness.

When I asked Erin why she picked this verse she said, "Because it's all there!" And I think she's right. This is what God wants from us. Our love. And what does that say about God? Ours is a God of love. No matter what else you might hear or read – God is about love. Always has been and always will be.

+ + +

Susannah said she was drawn to Paul's letters to the Corinthians because of what they had to say about love. Her verse, 2 Corinthians 13:11 is from the end of a letter that must have been pretty hard for Paul to write. There were people in Corinth who had questioned his authority. They were causing trouble, telling people that maybe Paul shouldn't be telling them what to do and how to do it. Paul said that he was criticized for the way he spoke and wrote and so he defended himself with some of his most important teachings. He talked about the importance of forgiving others, living in Christ and giving generously to the church. And he ends by talking about how God changed his life.

Susannah's memory verse comes at the very end of the letter when Paul says, "Finally, brothers and sisters, good-bye. Put things in order, respond to my encouragement, be in harmony with each other, and live in peace—and the God of love and peace will be with you."

How good to know that even a guy like Paul could have complicated relationships with other people in the church, because it isn't always easy to live in community. To understand how other people think and to not be angry or disappointed when their actions don't match up with our expectations is tricky. But even though he was both sad and mad, Paul was able to proclaim the good news that ours is a God of peace and love. Ultimately it is those qualities that Paul tried to embody. Susannah's choice is a fine reminder of what God is like as well as what God wishes for us to be like as we interact with the rest of God's children.

What's God like? He is the God of peace and love.

+ + +

Elijah's verse was a puzzle for me at first. Why would someone choose a verse from the crucifixion story? It's an interesting choice, unexpected even. Honestly, I wondered if he picked it because it was short and pretty easy to memorize, but that didn't seem right. We don't know each other very well, but from all I know, Elijah doesn't seem like the kind of guy looking for an easy answer. So I asked him, why this verse? And his response is one I hope you will remember. Elijah basically said that with everything that was going on, Jesus took time to forgive people. He was dying on the cross, and STILL Jesus was thinking about other people.

Brilliant!

Martin Luther once said if you wanted to know what God is like - then imagine a man dying on a cross. It is in the crucifixion that we see most clearly what kind of character God is. God loves us and the whole world, in all of time and history. God loves all of us so much that he was willing to give his son to die on the cross. God loves us so much, that he was willing to be one of us, giving his very life for our sake.

+ + +

Thank you EJ, Susannah and Erin, for bearing witness today to the power of God's love for us and for sharing with our community, your love for God. Your affirmation of baptism is a witness to all of us and a reminder of the power of our own baptism, which is no small thing.

Here's one last thing about what God is like. After Easter, Jesus' followers had the scriptures to read to tell them about God's relationship with humanity. They had all the stories of Jesus' life to share with each other and with other people, but God knew we needed something more and so, as it says in the Gospel according to John, God sent the Holy Spirit to be with us.

Here's the thing, the name that John uses for God's Spirit is really hard to translate. The word is **paraclete**. If you break it down: para is Greek for "alongside" or "together." So a *paragraph* is writing that is together. And a *paralegal*, is someone who works alongside of a lawyer. And a *parasite* is someone who just comes along for the food.

The other half of this curious name for the Spirit is *cleto*s which means called. So the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit is the one who is called to be alongside us. Called to walk alongside us. Called to cry with us. Called to rejoice alongside of us. Called to speak the truth of God's love, alongside us.

Jesus said that his followers were to testify about him and about God. We are to tell other people what God is like. We are invited to share the good news that God loves us and that we don't have to be afraid because the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit is with us.

Our God is always alongside of us.

The God of love. The God of peace. The God of forgiveness

Because that's what God is like.