
Who is Jesus?
Martin Grove United Church
November 28, 2018
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 16:13-20 and John 15:9-17

Who is Jesus? Obviously, it's the person on our bulletin cover. That was easy! Shall we go for coffee now? I'm actually serious about the coffee. I do realize that some Christians like to talk about Jesus because that's how we deepen our love for Jesus and it helps us make the ministry of Jesus more present here and now. Other Christians want to avoid the conversation because we consider questioning who Jesus is/was somehow demonstrates lack of faith. For some people, questioning faith is threatening. For some people, questioning faith is how they strengthen their faith. One gift of this church is that we welcome all here - we welcome those who like to question things as well as those who don't like those questions.

I want to begin by stepping a bit further back. Consider these 2 questions: A: Do you believe Jesus walked on water? B: Do you believe in God?

Those 2 questions have a lot in common. They are both questions of faith. They are both questions you might expect to be addressed in church. Both questions assume a yes/no answer. But the questions are also vastly different in how we understand them.

Take a moment and consider your own answers to the questions. Now - when I asked "Did Jesus walk on water?" was anyone unsure what I meant by "walking on water"? No. I suspect we all had a very clear sense of what "walking on water" means. The only issue is whether or not you believe that Jesus did it.

But when I asked "Do you believe in God?" some of you will certainly say that it depends on what we think the word "God" means. Some Christians act as if the question "Do you believe in God?" can only be answered yes or no. But many thoughtful people of faith understand that the word "God" is both evocative and unclear at the same time.

Let me share a story with you. As you know, I used to volunteer at the Toronto West Detention Centre. I made weekly visits with inmates as a "Christian Volunteer". I recall one occasion when I was meeting an inmate for the very first time. After

introducing myself, he blurted out, “I don’t believe in God, you know.” So I said, “Tell me about this God you do not believe in.” What followed was a 5 minute rant about God. A God who had let the inmate down as a child. A God who was jealous, unjust, bloodthirsty, racist, genocidal - I could go on. And when the ranting was over, I simply said, “Well, I don’t believe in that god either”. The inmate did not reject God - he just rejected a particular image of God. This story - even though it sounds like a script from a B-grade prison movie - is completely true, and I had similar experiences on other occasions during my time at the West.

In 2006, Richard Dawkins released “The God Delusion”, a book which supposedly said that the Christian God was a delusion. Most Christians who I spoke with about the book refused to read it. Which is a pity in a way. I didn’t read the whole thing, but I read enough to know that - just like with the inmates - Dawkins claimed to reject belief in God, but he had painted an image of a “god” that I don’t believe in either. Dawkins created a “straw man” God and then showed how ridiculous it was, but I would argue it was Dawkins image of God was the delusion. Dawkins said very little about the God that I myself believe in.

Dawkins is not an idiot. He is a distinguished professor at the University of Oxford after all. Most inmates are not idiots either. How is it that these people carry in their minds images of a God that they reject?

Part of it has to do with the Bible. To quote Dawkins, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, ... sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”¹ Dawkins has taken a completely unsympathetic reading of the Old Testament and constructed in image of God from it. And while I will argue that Dawkins took a very unsympathetic reading of the text, I do hope that we all know that Dawkins is correct that those images of God are all depicted in the Bible if you read it literally.

Perhaps the other main reason people carry images of a God that they reject is life experience. Most long-term inmates have suffered abuses themselves, often leading to

¹ Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion

the image of “God as father” being a horrible image for them. And instead of releasing that image of God and embracing a more helpful image of God, they keep the image itself and deny the existence of God. But there are other paths forward.

I’m sure we can all think of images of God that make us wince. Like the image of God as a vending machine - you know - if you just pray hard enough you’ll get what you ask for. And if you don’t get what you want then you just didn’t pray “right”. The “adult version” of that is called the “Prosperity Gospel” by the way. Or the image of God as Santa Claus - you know - “he sees you when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good so be good for goodness sake.” That song really blends Santa and God together in uncomfortable ways, and supports the image of God is an old man with a white beard - suspiciously similar to Santa Clause just without the red suit.

I still cringe myself when I head a radio preacher who at one point in their sermon says that “God is beyond our imagination” and then later on in the same sermon says, “but I know that God hates ...[insert the name of a group you yourself hate]” And I wonder what sort of image of God can be both beyond our imagination and at the same time very humanly, hateful. This is symbolized well in this famous quote, “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people that you do”

Christianity has often fought against the natural process of allowing our images of God to grow with us, while at the same time some leaders have tried to move the conversation forward, and that has led to people talking about God - more. For example, one movement started in the UK about 40 years ago was driven by the idea that Christians in church should stop using the word “God” altogether for at least 20 years. The really cool thing about this movement was that these people all deeply believed in God. They were not trying to get rid of God, just the word “God” and to instead use words that had more meaning to them. Instead of the word “God”, they used words like: blessing, love, spirit, essence, being, light, heat, hope, sacred, holy, one, ground of all being, shining, flow, groundedness, lightness of being, emptiness, immensity, deep, joy, understanding, awe, life, deep unto deep, creativity, healing, delight, strength, centre,

root, intimate knowing, questing, power, wedge of possibility, stillness, grounding, whisper, heartbeat, thunder, longing. They certainly have a point. I can promise you that when Donald Trump uses the word “God”, and when I myself use the word “God” we are NOT talking about the same thing at all. The word “God” is vague and means different things to different people because each of us holds our own image of God.

Consider this. In school, we learned about “nouns” and “verbs”. In school we learned that a noun was a “person, place, or thing”. And a verb was an “action word”. And those rules were adequate for teaching children to write properly. But in the adult world, we know that those definitions are too limiting, and are in fact wrong. Consider the word “happiness”. That’s a noun, right? Is “happiness” a person? No. Is it a place? No. Is it a thing? Not really. And verbs are not always about action. “To be” is not action. “To stay” is not action. The school definitions were helpful when we were children, but they are too limited for the real world.

Similarly, the images of God many people learned in Sunday School were a great way for children to learn about God. And for some people, those images have remained adequate throughout their lives. But for other people, the Sunday School definitions of God are so limited that the images are meaningless. And for those people, traditional images of God need to be rejected and more creative images of God need to be used in order for them to be faithful to the God that they experience.

To quote one reader of the Observer, “Some of us need and are content with straightforward explanations of the Great Mystery, and there is nothing at all wrong with that. But others are drawn into the mystery in ways that ring true and defy traditional notions. There is nothing wrong with that. I want my United Church to have room for both. God is too big for anything less.”

All this sets the stage to discuss our own local “problem child” in the United Church of Canada, the Reverend Gretta Vosper. My intention speaking about her is not to “pick sides”, but to simply explain what has been happening. Gretta served in the United Church for about 10 years and then one day, while she was performing a communion liturgy, she came to realize that she didn’t understand all of the words that she was saying. Words that had over time become more vague, including “God”. This led her to

an exploration of images of God. Initially, she rejected images of God that speak of a small-minded god. Over time, she started speaking more of a God of love. Over time, she started speaking simply about love itself. Gretta also wanted media attention. Love wasn't grabbing much attention. So she ramped up the PR until she hit on the "A Bomb" by declaring herself an "atheist minister". Then, the media went crazy, which was her intention. Her tagline is "irritating the church into the 21st century" after all. Initially, Gretta just wanted to get the church to talk about God. But that was too threatening for many of us and we didn't do it. So she ramped up the PR until she hit on the "A Bomb" That has created a lot of drama. And after more than 2 years of drama, it has been decided that Rev. Vosper and her congregation are welcome to stay within the umbrella called the United Church of Canada. The UCC has decided that God is large after all.

If you don't like drama yourself, I would invite you to actually read her books. As one observer reader said, "If you would read her books, you would find that she is NOT an atheist but is objecting to & rejecting the language of the church that is loaded with GUILT as she calls us to live in love, respect, acceptance & responsibility to one another & our Universe."

Frankly, I don't see why this situation has to be so complicated. For me it's simple. God is beyond our imagination so we should be humble enough to know that the images of God that each of us carry in our own heads are incomplete, imperfect. And since we get to choose the image of God that we carry around, why not pick an image that is helpful to us, nurturing to us, strengthening to us. If we can't fit all of God into our heads (and none of us can) then why not discard any parts of that image that are small-mindedly human and embrace the God of love as our image? After all, Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

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Amen.