

WHO GOD IS
Sermon for Pentecost 16B: Mk 8: 27-38
LPC, 9/13/15

As most of you know, about a year and a half ago I conducted a congregational study for my doctoral project, assisted by a small team. Part of this study was interviewing selected members of the congregation. We had a set of prescribed questions to ask. Consistently what appeared to be the most challenging question among these was this: “Who is God for you?” When asked this question, most people in the study would get real quiet, their faces tending to become softer and unguarded, as if asked to describe someone they knew and loved well. That’s when I realized how deep spirituality really does run here at Lawrencefield Parish Church.

“Who is God for you?” You could think of that question as a twenty-first-century version of the question Jesus asks the disciples in today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark: “Who do you say that I am?” As with the biblical question, it may be helpful to prepare for the 21st-century question by considering how other people might answer the question.

Who is God for other people? Well, it’s evident that God is many things for different people. Judging from Hallmark cards and inspirational posters, God for many people is a warm blanket. Judging from what some other people say on waving placards, God is a judge and a disciplinarian, even a hater.

Who is God for you, then? From the examples I just gave, it’s apparent that who God is for people can be deduced not just from what they say, but from how they behave. I think it’s also safe to say that what people say about God is sometimes at odds with the way they behave.

I wonder how it would change our behavior if, when contemplating an action, we considered what observers might conclude about what kind of God we worship.

I’ve heard people say that they drive more considerately after putting a bumper sticker on their car advertising their church, because they don’t want other people to think badly of the church if they happen to drive badly. It’s kind of like that. People being people, the group with whom you identify will be judged by your behavior, and that includes when you identify as a Christian. People will infer the kind of God your worship, by the way you act.

Of course, a difficulty arises because actions can be interpreted in different ways by people with different sets of values. For example, Rich and I spent part of the last week in Amish country, in central Pennsylvania. Conservative Amish, by their clothing and their eschewal of modern conveniences, conspicuously demonstrate that their values are not those of the prevailing culture. On the one hand, an observer might conclude that they worship a God of quietness and simplicity. On the other hand, one might conclude that their God is a quaint Luddite, or a maker of arbitrary and strict rules. Which is correct?

Or to make the question topical: is the God of Kim Davis, the clerk who refused to issue a same-sex marriage license a God of tradition or a God of narrowness? You see, it can get tricky. There is always more than one way to look at things.

Even the four Gospel writers didn't look at everything Jesus did in the same way. I think it is indicative of how the compilers of Bible saw things that they deliberately put together four differing versions of Jesus' life without trying to harmonize them or reduce them to one definitive version. (Just so you know, this is a quintessentially Anglican or Episcopal viewpoint!)

Does this make our faith meaninglessly relativistic? No. When in doubt about a biblical or church teaching always read the rest of the story. And the rest of this story from Mark has an unexpected ending. Peter answers Jesus question, "Who do you say that I am?" by saying "You are the Messiah." *Bing-bing-bing!* Top marks, Peter!

Then Jesus unexpectedly goes on to describe his own immanent suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. And Peter reacts just as, probably, any one of us would. Peter says, "Never! The Messiah cannot suffer and die! That is not the kind of God I want to believe in!"

But that is the kind of God Jesus is. Jesus is the kind of God who stops at nothing for love of others. This is the kind of God who, in the Incarnation, didn't stop at being limited by human existence, and this is the kind of God who goes to the cross for the sake of those he loves. And he loves everybody.

If we lose sight of the kind of God we really have, then we run the risk of reducing our God to something less than what our God really is. When our picture of God is as judge and rule-maker, that picture is fine so far as it goes, but it must also include the part about God being totally self-sacrificial for love. When our picture of God is as a warm blanket and comforter, that picture is also not incorrect, but it is incomplete unless it also includes the reality that the way of love is also, sometimes, the way of suffering. When our picture of God is of Messiah in triumph, as it was for Peter, that picture too is incomplete, without the intense connection between God and humans forged by the incarnation, ministry and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

"Who is God for you?" is a complex question that can be answered in many ways, and in many very personal ways. But if we are Christians, who God is for us must include someone who stops at nothing, not even God's own suffering, for love of us.

Love *that* deep, that broad, that high. That is who the Christian God is.