

What is your image of God? Think on this for a moment. Mysterious? Vengeful? Loving? Fatherly? Female? Each of us has a different image of God and we hold it close to us like a security blanket. Now, imagine someone comes along and tells you that your image of God is not correct and that you must change your whole understanding of who and what God is. How many here would instantly say, “Oh, okay. Let me change that”? Probably not very many, because we’re generally not wired that way.

That’s kind of what’s going on in today’s Gospel passage. The people have been worshipping the same image of God for centuries. Along comes John the Baptist, a loner who lives in the desert eating bugs and honey. He has a severe manner about himself and tells everyone they must repent. He doesn’t conform to any societal norms. He doesn’t eat or drink like others. He doesn’t match their expectations of a prophet at all. Then Jesus comes along, as completely different from John as he could be. However, his whole ministry seems to revolve around eating and drinking with all of the wrong sorts of people. He certainly doesn’t match their image of the messiah. He eats and drinks too much. The people here are a lot like Goldilocks – *his* porridge is too hot; *his* porridge is too cold; *our* porridge is just right. They vilify and diminish John and Jesus and reject their message in order to protect their own images of God.

People do the exact same thing today. We want our religious leaders and our denominations to preach messages we are comfortable with. We want to worship a God who affirms what we already believe and think. We have always created God in our own image. We like nice, tidy definitions of him and we have specific expectations of what God is or isn’t. We reject anything that doesn’t conform to the picture we’ve painted. Our images generally don’t ask us to take risks, they don’t expect us to change, they don’t threaten us in any way, and they are comfortable and affirming.

What is wrong with that?

As theologian Dr. David Lose asked, “If God was just like us, who would save us?” There are people in our lives that we don’t like or that we ignore. There are people whose lives challenge, repulse, or confuse us; there are people we deem beyond redemption. If God was just like us, who would save those people? I guarantee we all fit into one of those categories from someone else’s perspective.

Fortunately for us, God shows up where we least expect it, in ways we can’t control or define. He challenges our preconceptions and shakes us out of our comfort zone. Just

when we think we're wise and have God all figured out, he comes along and tips over the apple cart. Remember the old Kool Aid commercials with the giant pitcher of Kool Aid that broke through walls, saying "Oh, yeah!"? Well, that's God. Whenever we build walls around our understanding and expectations of him, he bursts through the wall and says "Oh yeah!" at our surprise. The thing is, until we shake loose from the spiritual pride that blinds our eyes and closes our minds, God's purpose and presence will not be revealed to us.

Our Gospel today ends with some of the most oft-quoted verses in the Bible. The verse "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" – offers the quintessential image of a loving, caring Jesus. We need the hope that is found there. It reminds us that God is far bigger than we are and will help us bear the burdens that weigh down our souls. There is a short poem by Wendell Berry called "The Peace of Wild Things" that embodies the spirit of verse 28. I'd like to share it with you now.

When despair grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

As beautiful and restful and idyllic as the Matthew verses are, there is a deeper meaning to them. They are usually interpreted along the lines of Jesus offering to completely take away all of our burdens and challenges if we just lay them down at his feet. The key verse here is "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." For those who aren't familiar with a yoke, it's a solid wood contraption that fastens around the necks of 2 oxen. In whatever way one moves, the other has to do the same. If one turns, the other turns. If one runs or lags behind, so does the other. There is no flexibility or compromise.

By inviting us to take his yoke, Jesus is inviting us into discipleship. Are you sensing a theme here? All of our Gospel readings since Pentecost at the beginning of June have been about discipleship. His invitation calls for more than just reading scripture and praying; it calls for emulating his behavior. Being yoked to Jesus means doing what he does. To read about feeding the hungry is vastly different than actually feeding the hungry. The truth of what we believe is shown by how we live. We experience God through the needs of our neighbors, through the people that don't look like us or act like us, through the people that don't believe the same things we believe, and through those who defy our expectations. He reminds us that we are called to care for them, welcome them, and share their burdens. We find ourselves when we leave the self behind and meet others where they are. A life of faith takes place well outside of our comfort zones.

Truly loving God and our neighbors is not easy work. A yoke does not completely remove the burden from one of the oxen. But we don't have to bear the burden alone. Jesus is right there by our side, equipping us, encouraging us, forgiving us, loving us, saving us. This is what makes our burden light and the yoke easy. Amen.