

The Nature of God

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, May 14, 2006; Bryn Mawr, PA*

1 John 4:7-21
“*God is Love*”

Movement 1 – Looking for Assurance

Show me God!

“If I could just know with certainty than I would believe!”

Show me God!

“If I just know what kind of deity God is then I would have faith and follow.”

Show me God!

“Of what I call God, and fools call nature (Robert Browning)”

Show me God!

“In the faces of men and women I see God” (Walt Whitman).

Show me God!

Show me this one who we claim to be the creator of the world and all things. Show me this one whom we claim to be in control of our lives. Show me the one whom so many invoke and cry out to for hope, for help and for assurance. Show me God!

How often have we heard this demand? How often have we made this demand? How often have we found ourselves in the bog of despair, and have cried out to God for some assurance, for some direction and for some hope. How often have we asked to see God and know God? Show me God!

It is assurance that we look for. We want to know whom it is we are following, worshiping, and in whom we place our faith. We want to know that we are on the right track with our faith journey and that we believe in a benevolent being. Before we jump out of the world and into this freefall journey of Christianity, we want to know a little something about God. After all, our conception of God may affect the way we live our faith. We would like to think that maybe God is a George Burns figure as he was in *O God, You Devil*. Or maybe God is a Morgan Freedman type of person as he was in *Bruce Almighty*. These are nice, pastoral, grandfatherly ideas about God that give us comfort. It is a comforting idea of God as that kindly Peter Falk kind of figure. Let that be God! Show us God!

Or maybe we would like to think of God as a warrior, as a Spartan, as the embodiment Mars the war planet, because vengeance, violence and aggression is on our mind. We want to think of a righteous, judging, vindictive God. In the movie *Dogma* the two fallen angels lament the passing of the God of sulfur, fire and death. They miss those days and those times. Show us God!

Show us God, but make sure it fits the ideas of God that we want. Just as Feuerbach predicted and suggested, we project upon God our desires and our needs. We need a father figure and God is a father figure. We need a protector and God is a protector. We need an avenger and God is an avenger. Show us God, but make sure that God is always on our side. Show us God, but make sure that God fits our social conceptions and projections. The angry Christian has an angry God. The quiet Christian has a quiet God. The consuming Christian has a consuming God. Show us God!

The question is dangerous, audacious and presumptuous. The demand is full of vanity and desire, and it is one that is not new to today. The early community of Christians to whom John was writing to wanted to see and know God. They yearned for a God of Greek philosophy, a God of individual knowledge and dualistic understandings, and some cults tempted and swayed the early Christians to that vision of God. It was a kind of God that would make sense in their world. It was a kind of God that would make sense in their particular society. It was the God that they wanted to see and know. Show us God!

Throughout history humanity has tried to create, conceive and understand God in ways that made sense to them and fit agendas. We have ignored again and again the words of Abraham Lincoln who said,

“Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them.” Instead we look to find the God that is most like us. We tend to mold and shape God to fit our desires. We find assurance, we find rest and we find grace in the God that is like us. Show us God!

Movement 2 – The Textbook Answer

And the theologians have chimed in. They came running to the early Christians to explain the different nature of God, to offer discourse on the divine nature of Christ, or the human nature of Christ. They pontificated piously about the subtle nuances, which need to be known in order to understand the nature of God. They came to this early group of Christians and confused them, led them astray, and created theological havoc in their faith lives. The theologians have chimed in.

And they have continued to chime in. They have continued to run into the church with their robes flowing, and ready to share the latest “aha” which will only lead to and add to our confusion. Aquinas runs in and offers us five ways to prove and demonstrate the existence of God by observing nature. Anselm runs in and offers us a four-step proof of the existence of God by using only our minds. Descartes runs in and offers to take away all assurance of anything, which we might have and then give us God. Kant performs metaphysical gymnastics before our eyes and then offers a way to conceive of God’s existence. The theologians have chimed in and offered us a textbook of answers to our desire and question about the nature and existence of God. Show us God, we cry, and the theologian have responded by saying, sit down, take out a paper and pencil, take some notes and learn our conception of God.

Now don’t get me wrong, I have nothing against theologians. I consider myself an aspiring theologian, and I look forward to the day when I can bore you with my obtuse, obfuscation and circumvention of God. The theologians are speaking out of their own social context and to their own social context. The theologians are trying to offer very serious answers that are still couched in faith of deep and profound questions about God. But the theologians can only take us so far and we can’t rest on them for faith. I had a friend who believed in God because of the writings of Aquinas. That doesn’t seem to be enough for me. There seems to be a vacuum of passion and conviction in the theologian’s God. Yet the other extreme seems to be the popular God, the God of the masses. The masses tend to shape God to fit their own needs and desires. The masses make God the grand check-writer, the great general, or the holy healer, depending on what you need. God could either be cold and aloof, or the projection of whatever it is we want.

I remember when I was hiking on the Appalachian Trail, and thinking about the existence of God. I knew the theologians and the philosophers. I knew their thoughts and ideas and concepts, but they weren’t enough. Each time I rested on one theologian and thought that maybe I could now begin to understand God, there was always the other side, the “what if,” the lack of proof. I was left on my own to understand the existence and nature of God, and as I traversed over mountains and through valleys I wrestled with the idea of God. I wanted to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God did indeed exist. I remember one morning at 5:00 am; I woke up with emptiness in my heart. I had been praying for two weeks to understand God. I had been looking for two weeks to understand God. I had made no progress at all. I finally stood up and cried out, “Show yourself, God! Reveal to me that you do truly exist. Tell me who you are!” The theologians didn’t help me. Nature didn’t help me; I couldn’t help myself and was left alone with my own cries of desperate needs of assurance. Show me God!

Movement 3 – The Answer of Scripture

As I was crying out in the wilderness I looked down at my pack. Resting beside my journal was my Bible. The Holy Word was at my feet; it was, as the song suggests, a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. I picked up the Bible and read through some of the very familiar passages. I read about the Israelites led by God in the wilderness. I read about Daniel in the lion’s den. I read about Jonah in the belly of that great fish, and about God’s words to Jeremiah. I read about Christ and his relationship with God. I read Paul’s exhortations about God, Paul’s prayers to God, and Paul’s relationship with God. Then I read this passage for today, and finally my eyes were opened. The scriptures revealed to me the person, the nature, and the power of God. I cried out that God be revealed to me, and God responded, “pick up and read.” And just as Augustine did in the garden I made a decision at that moment to believe. I made a decision to suspend doubt, to suspend questions, and to suspend uncertainties, even if only for a moment, and believe that this book, this holy word would reveal to me the nature of God.

We are called to do the same. We are called to suspend the pulls and temptations of the culture in one way or the other and to rely on the witness of our tradition as we find it in scripture. Think of that

early community of Christians trying to understand the nature of God. They were pulled by Gnostics and Greeks and Jews. Yet they had the guidance of one of their community, they had the guidance of one who was a part of this group of people who had walked with Jesus, and that one called the early Christians to continually look to Christ to understand God. They were called to believe in God through Jesus Christ, who is connected to the story of the Jews and carries into the story of salvation. We are called to do the same with the Word as our guide.

We cry out, “Show us God,” and we turn to scripture for guidance and assurance of the person and nature of God. We are connecting to a deeper tradition, one of which the theologians were a part, one that was started with Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, continued through Moses, the patriarchs and the prophets and was made full through Jesus the Christ. This is our story, it is the story of God acting, caring for, and leading us as the holy, chosen people. The scriptures reveal to us that tradition, it reveals to us the person and actions of Christ, and the scriptures show us God.

Movement 4 – God is Love

In the scripture for today, God is described as love. In what is described by F.F. Bruce as one of the great theological treatises of the New Testament, God is Love. The answer given to the community of early Christians struggling to understand the nature of God is that God is love. The answer given to our own cries and demands is that God is love. God is not described as a prime mover, as a divine creator, as a holy judge, or as that which nothing greater can be conceived. God is not described as the heavenly president, the source of prosperity, but as love. God can be all those others things, God may very well be many of those others things, but primarily God is love. The God who cries out to the people of Jerusalem through the prophets to turn and change their ways is crying out of love. The God who refuses to reward selfish actions of kings and priests is displaying acts of love. The God who leads the people to the Promised Land is acting out of love. We can see how God is love throughout the Bible, primarily in the life, the actions and the ministry of Jesus Christ. The God who came to us, stayed with us, and died for us is love. This is a profound, holy love. This isn't a love of infatuation. This isn't a love of fleshly desire. This is the love made perfect through God. God is love!

Through Christ we know that God's love is a relational love. Through Christ we know that God's love pours towards all of us. That God is love means that God desires a relationship with each and every one of us. That God is love means that God yearns to be with each and every one of us. As John Wesley said, “This little sentence brought St John more sweetness, even in the time he was writing it, than the whole world can bring. God is often styled holy, righteous, wise; but not holiness, righteousness, or wisdom in the abstract, as he is said to be love; intimating that this is his darling, his reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all his other perfections.”

God is love, and those that know love, know God.

Movement 5 – We Show God with our Actions

We can't pontificate the nature of God. We can't discourse about the different types of love, and the substance of love or the form of love. We can't teach the nature of God. Instead, we are to show the nature of God. This is an exhortation of the scripture; we are to love one another just as God loves us. We are to live into the nature of God; we are to show the nature of God.

Have you ever seen the movie, *The Mission*? In this movie a mercenary who killed his own brother is looking for some assurance and hope about God. It was in reading this passage that he began to understand and to give his life to God. Later the native village where the missionary worked was under threat by an army, and the mercenary intended to protect the village with violence. The other missionary responded with the same passage, God is love, and violence is not the way of love. It is this relational love, which calls us to care for the other no matter what, because God cares for the other as well.

For the first 1600 years of Christianity (and beyond), one of the cardinal virtues of practicing the faith was charity because that was the way one would live out the nature of God. Charity is living out and acting out love. Can you imagine if we try to live out the nature of an angry God? Maybe you know those Christians who live as if God were angry. Or maybe you know those Christians who live as if God were self-centered and narcissistic. Or maybe you know those Christians who live as if God were just. Yet we are given the scripture that tells us that God is love and we are to live out that love.

Love is relational, it is active and it is present. When we embrace the idea that God is love, we embrace the idea that God desires to be in a relationship with us. When we embrace the concept that God is love we embrace the idea that God is acting with us and through us. And this is primarily known

through Christ. The love of God is shown through a redeemer who came to earth, who lived among us, taught us, and died for us. That is God's love. The love of God is shown through the tenderness of Christ, the patience of Christ and the care of Christ. The love of God is shown through a Christ that lived so much that it was too much for the world and we turned. Can we live that love as well. The world is crying out to see God – can we show them God with our love? Can we show the world the nature of God through our actions? Can we show the world the nature of God, that God is love?

Movement 6 – Perfection through the Holy Spirit

We must be bold in our actions, and then rest on the Holy Spirit. We must be brash and brazen in our actions of love and then rest on the divine advocate. Sometimes I worry that I won't show God's love in my own actions. Sometimes I worry that I might be misguided and might get it wrong. But with the Holy Spirit I can't go astray and I can't be misguided. Sometime I wonder and I worry that I might not be the right person or the best person to show God's love. But God says to you and God says to me that you are loved, that you are worthwhile, and that you are God's blessed child. You can show God's love because you have God's love.

Oh what grace it is that brings us together in this place week after week. Oh what grace it is that carries us through week to week. Let that grace, let that spirit lead your actions, lead your words and lead your lives as you show God's love to each other. Beloved, let us love one another for God is love and those who abide in love abide in God. Beloved, let us lay down our lives for each other in acts of love as Christ laid down his life for you and for me. Beloved, let the love you have for each other be perfected through the Holy Spirit. Let us be bold in our love; let us be brash in our love. Do not be afraid in your acts of love, for the perfect love of God will cast out fear.

Isn't it fitting that this passage falls on Mother's Day? Isn't it fitting that we find ourselves celebrating the mother as we celebrate the love of God. Every parent knows what it is to take a chance in loving a child. Every parent knows what it is to allow a child to live, to discipline a child, to show a child God through acts of love. Let us be that bold and brash in our love.

Show me God, show me love and I will know God. Abide in love, abide in God and abide in hope.
AMEN