
The God We See!

A sermon by the Rev. Salmoon Bashir
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 28, Year A

Ann Belford Ulanov, a professor at Union Theological Seminary writes that: *Picturing God must precede any speaking about God, for our pictures accompany all our words and they continue long after we fall silent before God.*

The image of God we have in our hearts and minds must precede anything we say about God.

I am sure many of you have heard about St. Ignatius. St. Ignatius of Loyola composed a retreat handbook of Spiritual Exercises. There are 3, 7 and 30-days **silent** retreats that are based on Ignatius spirituality.

A few years ago, I went to a beautiful Dominican sisters' monastery in Switzerland to spend 30 days in silence doing these spiritual exercises. It was the early spring season and the place where I was staying at, on one side, was surrounded by snowy mountains and on the other side there was a beautiful lake. I spent those 30 days exploring two major questions of my life: first was God's call for me to the ordained ministry and second one an even more important question was discerning whether I was called to be a monk and live a celibate life! Yes, at some point I was considering a life of celibacy.

In those 30 days I met with my spiritual accompaniment every day and I was allowed to speak only to him and only for 30 minutes a day. No phones, no internet, no letters, no communication to the outside world. The image of God I had when I entered the 30-day silence was very different from the image of God I have now. Instead of being open, I feared the questions of What if! What if I don't choose the life of celibacy and how God is going to punish me.

What if I will discern not to pursue ordain ministry! There was fear and lots of what-ifs.

Instead of seeing God as loving, liberating and life-giving God, I was seeing God as a master who is waiting to pass a verdict on me if I don't do certain things in a certain way.

Then one day, my spiritual accompaniment with whom I was meeting every day, asked me 'Salmoon why are you so full of fear. You need to trust that God loves you today, tomorrow, and forevermore. No matter how you hear the voice of spirit in your life, God is and will be with you always!'

I went into this retreat imagining God sitting on the throne to punish and to pass judgements and verdicts. But those 30 days changed my perception of God to a loving, life giving and liberating God who is there for us when we fail or fall and calls us His beloved children. Together with discerning about the future of my ministry, I think most importantly I was able to carve the generous, loving and caring image of God in my heart and mind.

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What kind of image of God have you created in your heart and mind? God of wrath, anger or God of justice, peace, and love? God which punishes and pushes into darkness or God of grace and abundance? Brothers and sisters, there is a direct relation between our image of God and our behaviors and relationship to God and to one another.

In the Gospel today we hear a story of a master who went on a long journey, and he entrusted his three servants with a large sum of money without giving them clear instructions of what to do with it. Matthew does

enjoy big numbers as we might recall from his other “financial” parables, and this is to no surprise, of course, with him being a former tax collector. He loves to tell stories in numbers.

The three servants in today’s story are the wealthy master’s “retainers” or household bureaucrats — essentially, the middlemen who oversee the land and the workers, collect the debts, and keep the profits coming while the master travels on business. Seeing how the master trusted his servants, I can imagine there must have already been an established relationship between him and his servants.

Two things – trust and relationship we already got from the first couple of verses of this parable. The master entrusts his wealth to his servants. Not only is he trusting them with his wealth, but also, he does so over a long period of time.

Historically, in Jesus’s day, “talents” were not coins or small crumples of cash. A talent which was first a unit of measure of silver or gold became the highest denomination of currency. A “talent” was an astronomical sum of money, roughly equivalent to 15-20 years of wages for the average worker in those days. Being from an engineering background, I can’t resist the urge to explain the story through more numbers! Here in this context, the daily wage was approximately 1 denarius. So, the typical laborer worked 50 weeks of the year and earned an annual wage of about 300 denarii. Now suppose you continued to work as a day laborer earning 300 denarii each year. After 20 years of such labor, you will have earned 6,000 denarii. Congratulations! You have worked for 20 years and have now earned 6,000 denarii **which was equivalent to 1 talent**.

This also means 5 talents were about daily wages equivalent to 100 years. So, you can imagine how large the sum of money was and the amount of trust it required for the master to hand it over to three different servants. A talent represented a staggering amount of money to Jesus’s peasant audience. The English word, “talent,” meaning “a special ability,” derives in part from this ancient sense of “a very valuable gift.”

After the long journey when the master came back, he asked for the report of what the servants did in his absence. Two servants who had 5 and 2 talents told their master what they did and how they expanded the master’s kingdom by taking risks, being encouraged by the trust he put in them and doubling what he gave to them. However, we can see, how the third servant’s mind was overcome with fear of death as he states “I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed.

So, I was afraid and went out and hid that one talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.” The third servant takes a timid approach, burying the money for fear of losing it. The third servant believes and perceives his master as a harsh, angry, and unmerciful man. He doesn’t respond to the trust his master has put into him and underestimates the possibilities of being a faithful and courageous servant because of a fundamental misunderstanding and the image he has of his master. And as we see in the parable, Master does to the third servant exactly how he perceives him. He was being cast down into the outer darkness.

As you all know this parable is generally understood as the master being God and us servants. And more often than not we can see ourselves acting like the third servant. I feel so much for him for being consumed by fear and building the image of his master as the angry, harsh man. I feel so much for us, children of God being tied down with our own fears and imagining God as judgmental and unmerciful. But it is not God, who is throwing us in the darkness. Instead, we are the ones creating this image of God in our minds and keeping ourselves in the darkness of fear, out of the abundance, love and light of our life-giving God.

The image of God we have in our hearts and minds must precede anything we say about God. I can imagine the two servants who took risks must have had something in their minds as well about their master, but they chose to respond to their master’s trust and generosity.

Friends, this parable of three servants is not about harsh, angry God who wants to throw you into the darkness but of God who wants to bless you through his abundant, generous and life-giving spirit even if we fall short which most of us do many times.

What we have to do is to align our image of God, our perception of God, who God is in our hearts and minds with God of life and love.

Dear Brothers and sisters in Christ, until we finally reject the projection of God as angry and judgmental, that fear of being thrown in the darkness will always rule over us. Like my spiritual accompaniment who helped me see and trust the kind of God who is loving, liberating and life giving, today I invite you to carve this image of God in your heart and mind and see how we inform each other’s faith through our lives, through the embodiment of our life stories of faith, courage, love, risks and trust in God’s abundant grace and that God

loves us even if we fail.

Our perception of God is crucial for our experience of God, because we meet God as we imagine and perceive God. The image of God we have in our heart and mind must precede anything we say about God. Amen!

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