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## God of Many Names

I was raised with the image of God as an all-powerful, all-knowing Father figure. This image does carry some positives: God as protective, loving, trustworthy, having our best interests at heart.

But it is also an image of a God who requires praise and good behavior in exchange for love. Sort of a Santa Claus on steroids. It's a picture of the divine being making lists of who's been naughty and who's been nice.

The nice folks get to go to heaven and the naughty folks are punished in hell for all eternity. However, this image has many problems. Unfortunately, it seems to be a very common image of God in our world.

But, if we don't accept the limitations of the image of God as Father, of God as a thinking, reasoning, all-powerful being sitting in judgment over humanity, how then do we understand the nature of God?

The Bible offers many different names and descriptions for God. Other belief systems also recognize the complexity of God.

- Islam gives ninety-nine names for God with a hundredth name being hidden from humankind.
- Hinduism honors many deities, each representing a different aspect of God.
- Taoism recognizes God as something formless and eternal, that can't be named by humankind.

Ultimately, God is not describable or definable. We know God by our experiences and the experiences of others, including the recorded teachings of Jesus and the stories about and by Jesus.

But, we only see little glimpses and small clues, put together to form an imperfect picture. Trying to define God is similar to trying to put together an infinitely sized jigsaw puzzle where each of us has been allocated only a few pieces.

Just like in Rumi's poem where the people had to shine their lights together to know they were seeing an elephant, we can come together in churches and communities and show our pieces to each other, revealing more and more of God, but the puzzle will never be complete.

Perhaps your pieces will fit with my pieces to give more detail to the picture. Perhaps our pieces will be so different as to seem to be from different puzzles entirely.

I wish to offer here a few pieces of the puzzle, to hold my candle along with yours that we all might know God just a little bit better. These pieces may not fit with your pieces, they may or may not make sense when placed along your experiences of God. I do hope they are worth some consideration, some thought, and some meditation.

Today is Trinity Sunday, when the church as a whole celebrates God as trinity. So, it certainly seems appropriate to talk about the trinity as an image of God. This image of God as three in one is itself difficult to understand.

Traditionally spelled out as father, son, and holy spirit, we might also sometimes offer alternative ideas such as thinking of the holy spirit as Sophia, the feminine spirit of God's wisdom.

Since many books have been written on the subject, I'm sure I could probably spend the entire sermon talking about the trinity

as a theory of God's nature, how it came about, and what it might mean, but I won't.

In fact, I'm not so sure the subtleties of trinitarian theory are all that important. But, I will offer one way in which I personally like to think of the trinity. One characteristic of God as trinity which I think is important and which we can find discussed in many places such as the writings of famous theologians or in novels such as "The Shack," is relationship.

The trinity as three in one must be relational – all parts relate to each other intimately. Relationship is inherent to God. To know God, therefore is to be in relationship. To be made in the image of God is to be inherently relational. Through community and relationship is how we know God – it is how we were meant to be.

Keeping in mind this inherent relational quality, I like to think of the Trinity in this way:

- God the "Father" as the cosmic God which is revealed to us, for example, in the awe-inspiring beauty of a sunset. The Majestic God we heard about in Psalms.
- Jesus the "Son" as the face of the "other." This is the face that calls out to us for justice, to love our neighbor. This is the Light come into the world to illuminate the darkness. Filled with Grace and Truth, it demands we recognize it.
- And, the third revelation of God in the trinity, I think of the Holy Spirit as the God within that guides us into truth, and reveals to us the love waiting for us in our relationship with the cosmic God and the God within the other.

These three revelations of God are still One God – a God of relationship. To be one, the three revelations must be in community, in relationship, and must know each other.

It is a concept of trinity and community that demands we know ourselves, each other, and all of God's creation as one with God in both our similarities and our differences.

It is a community called into being by the ministry of Jesus in his reaching out to the marginalized and in his greatest commandment to love God, neighbor, and self, a commandment reflected in this vision of the trinity of God within the cosmos, God within the other, and God within the self.

But the trinity is not the only way we have to think and talk about God, to know God. I would like us to celebrate all of the diversity found in our awesome, wonderful God. There are many images of God, but it might be worthwhile to consider for a brief moment what God is not.

Although we are created in the image of God, God is not a person. Yes, it is useful sometimes to get points across by personifying God, but I cringe a little when we start thinking of God as a person, whether it be father or mother or shepherd or royalty or whatever the image.

We need to make sure we remember that we are made in God's image, God is not made in our image. We shouldn't allow our images of God to limit God.

The Bible also sometimes depicts God as full of hate or vengeful, but I am convinced that God does not hate. If we see God as the creative Love-force of the universe, then God cannot hate. How could God hate God's own creation?

Neither is God petty or vengeful. When the authors of the Bible make these attributions to God they are trying to understand God with what they knew of the world. If something awful happened, it must have been because God was angry...

but, although we should learn from them, we should not be limited by the understandings of God held by those who lived thousands of years ago. We know so much more of the world through science and an additional two thousand years of the experience of God.

There are probably many more things we could say God is not. But instead let's name some of the things that God is. All of these characteristics I name are concepts of God that can be found in the Bible.

God is...

Love - Nothing can separate us from the Love of God (Romans 8:38-39). Love is from God and God lives in us through Love (1 John 4:7, 12). The fruit of the Spirit is Love (Galatians 5:22).

Peace - Peace found through Jesus (John 14:27, 16:33). Life and Peace is found in the Spirit (Romans 8:6). The fruit of the Spirit is peace (Galatians 5:22).

Within All Things - The Kingdom of God is within us (Luke 17:21). God is within all things, all things are within God.

Creator - All things originate in God (Ephesians 3:9, Colossians 1:16)

Kind - Love is kind (1 Corinthians 13:4). The fruit of the Spirit is kindness (Galatians 5:22).

Beauty – God is beautiful (Psalm 27:4). God can be felt in the awe-inspiring beauty of nature or art.

Rock, Fortress, and Refuge - God is the solid foundation which sees us through the uncertainties of life (Psalm 18:1-2).

Unlimited Abundance - God will supply what we need (Matthew 6:25-34). The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want (Psalm 23:1).

Receptive - God is waiting for us to knock, ask, search and God will open the door, take us in, and give freely (Matthew 7:7-11)

Forgiving - Be forgiving and God will forgive you (Matthew 6:14). You must be right with the world to be right with God.

Justice - Jesus rebukes the religious leaders for neglecting issues of justice (Luke 11:42). The Bible shows a deep appreciation for delivering justice to those in need such as the poor and abused. (see the Prophets)

Found in the quiet of the Soul - The Soul waits in silence to find the salvation and hope of God (Psalm 62:1,5).

Eternal - God always was and will always be (John 1:1-5). There is something in God that transcends the physical and speaks to the eternal-ness of life (John 4:13-14).

Life-giving - God, through each of us, is a life-giving force, a supplier of "living water" (John 7:38).

Sensual, a Lover - Two coming together in Love is as if two parts of God are reuniting for a time. (Song of Solomon)

Inclusive - The Good News of God is a great joy for ALL people (Luke 2:10).

How have you experienced God? Are these aspects of God compatible with how God is presented by many of today's spiritual leaders?

Trust God's voice within you to give you the answers to these and similar questions. Trying to define God is not really possible with our current language and the scientific limitations of humanity. Perhaps someday God will give to us the means to fully explain the Divine in a concrete way. Perhaps not.

However, the best we can do for now is to understand this mysterious power of Love through analogies and metaphors. Stories based on our own experiences of the Holy, much like the parables of the Bible, help us grasp this mystery.

There is but one God, but no one image of God is sufficient. Think of how we see God as a shadow projected onto a wall. The shadow shifts as life progresses. Many factors may effect how the shadow is experienced by us. But, the shadow, being two-dimensional, will never give us a complete picture of God.

We can name many characteristics of God, as I have done. We can also offer many metaphors for God and how we understand God, such as the shadow on the wall. Important, helpful metaphors, but also imperfect at describing God completely.

- We could talk about God as energy that can't be touched but is everywhere. Full of power and possibility.
- Or God as the center of the circle of life. We, as spiritual beings, are the infinite number of radii connecting the center to the outer edge. As we move inward toward the spiritual center, we move closer to God and to each other. As we move outward toward the purely physical, we move farther from God and away from each other. But, we are always connected to both.
- Or we might talk of God as the sum of many parts where God is found within each of us but it is in coming together in community that we can really find the power of God.

- Or we might talk of reality as an infinite spider web spun by the Eternal God. Everything is connected. An event on one part of the web is felt everywhere.

But, no matter what characteristics we name or which metaphors we use, in the end God can't be defined. No matter how we try, God is always more than the words we have.

We each have to find for ourselves the image of God that fits us best from our personal experiences. We need to listen to others when they describe what their puzzle pieces look like, what they see when they hold up their candle.

But, we also need to remember to examine our own puzzle pieces, to describe what we see when we hold up our candle. So, don't forget to light your candle and hold it up... be on a journey to personally discover God.

And let us always rejoice and celebrate the diversity of God.

Let us sing to the God of many names.