



“Seeing God”
Scripture – John 14:1-14
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, May 14, 2017

“... It's not my fault I'm fiery, stubborn, sassy, short, tan, and happiest with fresh-baked bread and homemade pasta ... It's *hers!*”¹

So begins the caption beneath an image featured on Save Family Photos – an online project that is “on a mission to save family stories, one photo at a time.” Every image on this site tells a story – and not just because a picture is worth a thousand words. Beneath each face preserved in faded hues or black and white are remembrances left by a family member – memories that tell us something of the person captured on film.

So it is with this tribute to the fiery, stubborn, and sassy young woman pictured beside her bicycle, staring down the camera with confident yet playful eyes – a young woman who, in her later years, would be credited for her granddaughter's fiery spirit, short physique, and unabashed love of carbs.

That spirited granddaughter – the one who submitted this photograph – goes on to comment: “It's a little bizarre to look at photos of someone seventy years my senior and see myself in them, but I love it. Anyone who knows me knows this picture feels like it could be as much me as it is [my grandmother] ...”

You see this all the time in the stories on Save Family Photos – the sense that we all carry something of our ancestors within us. Time and again, there are stories about the things shared across generations: the qualities instilled, the passions passed down.

This is what happens with family – with the people with whom we share DNA or living rooms or family secrets. Call it genetics. Call it socialization. Call it spending too much time together. For better or worse, we all reflect something of the people who have formed us.

How many of us have heard:

“You sounded *just* like your mother when you said that.”

“You are the spitting image of your father!”

“When you start scheming you remind me so much of your uncle.”

“You do have your grandmother's spirit.”

¹ Instagram post by @alimakestings, shared on @savefamilyphotos (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BOpFsRJAsUe/>)

Whether it is the family nose, or the way we flatten our vowels when we speak, or the irrational love of puns that has been passed around the dinner table with the meatloaf, or an unwavering commitment to fairness, we all carry the marks of family in our bodies or our spirits. We can't escape it ... Whether we like it or not, we reveal something of those we call 'family.' Put another way: Others see our grandparents, our parents, our siblings, even our partners *in us*.

We know this about ourselves. Which is why we can begin to grasp – in our hearts, if not in our minds – Jesus' statement about the invisible God: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." As one commentary notes: this is "one of the highest christological claims placed on the lips of Jesus in this Gospel."² In other words: this one sentence crystalizes who Jesus is and his central place in God's mission – namely, the one who comes to make God known.

This may not seem like a radical concept to those of us who have spent time studying Scripture. But to that room full of first-century disciples, whose only sacred texts belong to what we now call the Old Testament, Christ's seemingly straight-forward statement would have seemed downright unbelievable.

You see, prior to the life of Jesus, no one would have claimed to have *seen* the Creator. What nonsense that would be! God was too holy, too transcendent, too far beyond the mortal gaze. That's why the Great "I AM" appeared to Moses in a burning bush, and journeyed with the people Israel in the guise of fire and cloud. As the Old Testament tells it, to look upon the face of the Holy One is to risk death; that's why God's hand shielded Moses as the glory of the Lord passed by the holy mountain upon which this servant stood.³

In the world of the Hebrew Scriptures, *this* is what it meant to encounter the Lord of heaven and earth. That's why the Gospel of John states plainly in its opening chapter: "No one has ever seen God."

But then, "the Word became flesh and lived among us."⁴ Or, as *The Message* translation of the Bible puts it: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son."⁵

The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood so that human eyes that had never seen God might behold the Creator of heaven and earth ... So that we might glimpse the fullness of God in the living, breathing, embodied form of the beloved Son.

For John, *this* is at the heart of Christ's mission: "to make known the Father, to reveal who God is."⁶ And, through Jesus' words and deeds, his grace and love, we *do* come to know the character of God.

We see something of the Creator's glory when the Word-made-flesh turns water into wine; and we glimpse the Father's compassion when Christ halts the hands of the Pharisees, saying: "Let anyone who is without sin be the first to cast a stone." We marvel at the fullness of the Great "I AM" whenever the Teacher points to ordinary experience to capture the extraordinary depth of God: *I am* the Bread of Life; *I am* the Good Shepherd; *I am* the Way and the Truth and the Life. We see something of the Holy One's vulnerability when Jesus kneels before his friends to wash weary feet; and we glimpse the very heart of God when Jesus sheds tears of sorrow at the tomb

² Molly T. Marshall, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010)

³ See: Exodus 3; Exodus 13:21; Exodus 33:20

⁴ John 1:14, NRSV

⁵ John 1:14 as translated by Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

⁶ Elisabeth Johnson, "Commentary on John 14:1-14," www.workingpreacher.org

of Lazarus.⁷ Most of all, we come to know the Father's deep, deep longing for relationship whenever Jesus draws others into the embrace of God and invites them – invites us – to life abundant.

It's kind of like when people say, "You have your mother's eyes" or "You're just like your father ... the way you find joy in the small things." As we reflect something of the people who have formed us, so Jesus reveals the character of the Father, the very heart of God. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus says.

One aside ... because it's Mothers' Day, and because this is a point worth noting: When Jesus (or when the church) refers to the Creator as "Father," it is not a statement about the gender of God. But about the intimate kinship of God. It's a testament to the closeness of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son – a relationship that we too are invited to claim by virtue of God's claim on us. That's why we use the phrase, "Child of God" every time we celebrate a baptism and welcome another into the family of faith. It is for *this* reason that so many of us cling to the language of 'Father' when we speak of the Eternal One – because it reminds us that the Lord of heaven and earth is as near to us as a parent. But others will find different language more helpful: perhaps 'God our Mother' or 'God our Parent' ... or something else. I hope that however you refer to the Creator, it is in a way that helps you claim the relationship that God yearns to share with each of us.

For *this*, Sisters and Brothers, is what is at stake here – throughout John's Gospel, and especially in the passage we have before us today: Intimacy ... Intimacy with the God we have come to know in Jesus. Intimacy that is akin to the bond between Father and Son. This is the very thing that inspires the holy, transcendent presence that reigns over the cosmos to become flesh and blood and move into the neighborhood ... so that we might see and know God.

This is the kind of relationship the disciples have enjoyed as they've shared wine with Jesus at the wedding in Cana, and broken bread with him on the hillside. And it's a relationship they fear losing. You see, we've backtracked to a scene before the resurrection, even before Jesus' death. Jesus has *just* shared his final meal with these friends and now turns to the task of saying 'goodbye' before his impending arrest. At this moment the disciples' hearts are heavy with grief, and their minds muddled by fear. So they default to the panicked questions and demands that come so easily when hearts are troubled: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied!" Lord, how will we stay in relationship with you once we can no longer lay eyes on you, and talk to you, and reach out and touch you?

Jesus' Word for these grief-stricken disciples is one that endures beyond the cross, beyond the empty tomb, beyond the Son's return to the Father: Do not let your hearts be troubled ... Trust in the God whose desire for relationship propelled the Word to become flesh and live among you. Remember: You do know God and have seen God. There is nothing uncertain about that.

The assurance of this text is one that brings comfort in every season, especially for those of us generations removed from the revelation of God in Christ Jesus – those of us who have never beheld the Father *or* the Son ... at least, not in the ways we might hope or expect.

But, here's the thing, we *do* know and *have* seen God. Perhaps not in the ways those first disciples witnessed the divine presence ... in water transformed to wine before their very eyes, or in five barley loaves multiplied and shared by thousands gathered on a hilltop. Perhaps we have not seen or touched the embodied form of the one who is the 'spitting image' of the Father.

But we do come face to face with God. We see Christ when we witness acts of compassion – in those moments when concern for another leaves no place for disdain or judgment. We glimpse the presence of Jesus when friends

⁷ See: John 2:1-11; John 8:7; John 6:35; John 10:11; John 14:6; John 13:1-20; John 11:35

gather to share another's suffering and wherever pain gives way to healing. We behold Christ when service leads to relationship – friendships formed across the table while hosting Family Promise, or discovered in helping students learn to read.

And – when the church is at its best – we see Jesus right here in our midst ... among disciples whom Christ has entrusted with his mission of making known the Father, of revealing who God is ... As we kneel before our brothers in Christ-like service, or weep with our sisters at the tomb of a friend, or gather around the table to break bread and share one cup, we recognize Christ in the very acts that first revealed God to us.

And – hopefully – our ministry of service also reveals God to others. After all, Christ called the church into being so that his presence would continue in the neighborhood ... By the power of the Spirit, we – who are called Children of God – do carry something of the Father in us, and reflect something of the Christ who formed us. So that others may look to the whole family of God and say, “When you love one another, you remind us so much of Christ.” or “You certainly have your Father's spirit.” And, in those moments, we realize that we know and have seen God – the one who has chosen not to be God without us, the one who draws near to the world. Even today. Even now.

Prayers of the People – Greg Jones

Eternal God, we struggle to find language large enough to do you justice. We believe you are the Creator of the Cosmos and the Energy of the Universe, yet our lexicon is inadequate to describe your ineffable being. You are more than human minds can fathom and beyond what artists, composers, and poets can portray; so we turn to symbols, similes, and metaphors to describe your nature.

Yet, while a precise description of your essence will always elude us, we are not clueless to your character. We believe that Jesus is our best window into your nature. When we look at *how* Jesus lived and *what* Jesus taught, it becomes apparent that love is your fundamental essence. You love us enough to create this amazing planet to meet our needs. You dot the world with beauty to delight our souls. You give us freedom so that life has purpose and meaning. You create us for relationships so that we can relish the indescribable joy of love.

Gracious God, on this day when we remember and celebrate mothers, we are mindful that you are like a loving human mother, and we are deeply grateful

for your constant love and for desiring the best for each of us,
that you forgive us when we forget to extend kindness and respect,
and that you never stop challenging us to become our better selves.

Everlasting God, we pray for mothers who are expecting the birth of their child that they may have patience and good health in the coming months.

We pray for new mothers who are experiencing changes beyond their imagining and learning to live with limited sleep.

We pray for older mothers who still provide their children with a dose of their wisdom and encouragement.

We pray for mothers who face the demands of single parenthood and pray they will find systems of support.

We pray for mothers who devote themselves to their families and remain faithful even when unappreciated and treated poorly.

We pray for mothers who were too wounded or ill or who for whatever reason failed to love and care for their children as you intend. Grant them forgiveness and new life, and may their children find healing in a loving community.

Loving God, we pause for a moment to remember our own mother or a special woman who cared for us like a loving mother. (pause)

We are especially grateful for ones who

nurtured us when we were young and unable to care for ourselves,
loved us when we were not especially easy to love,
comforted us when we were sad, afraid or injured,
supported us in times of adversity,
and showed us the importance of a spiritual life.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer that your kingdom will come, saying, **Our Father...**