

“God is...”  
Isaiah 54:7-10; 1 John 4:7-21;  
John 15:1-17

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This is the final sermon in this series I've been doing about “On the Way.” I was struck by how in Acts, the first Christians were called the People of the Way. So I began to think about that. If you think about what we've done, we've taken apart pieces of what it means to be People of the Way. If it were a building, we would have been taking it apart, going down deeper in and finding what was in the midst of all of that.

Last week we talked about the core in terms of the teaching of Jesus, that final commandment to love one another. “This new commandment I give you, to love one another even as I have loved you.” But there's something I think is even deeper than that, and that is God Gods' self. All of this would not be possible if we didn't have a God. So at the root of it all is God.

Now, the struggle with that is that oftentimes when I begin to think about God I want to think about the nature of God. I want to think about what God is, who God is and how I might understand who God is. But as I do that, I think about the nature of the world we live in, the complexities of it. I've got enough science background that there are certain things that seem a little beyond me. I don't quite understand. There's a certain area of life in biology that just is amazing to me. Then there's cosmology. I do not understand the structure of the whole universe. It's just astounding, and it's just a little over my head. So if I don't understand the nature of the universe, why do I think that I might understand the nature of God? Yet, so often, that's what we try to do is to try to understand the nature of God, or we think we have a handle on who God is. We make God a force within creation or we shape God in relationship to us.

I don't know how much Karl Bart gets quoted anymore, but he's a famous German theologian and he is basically saying there is nothing we can look at that tells us the nature of God. I don't know. It feels a little like hyperbole to me that God is not reflected at all in creation in some way, but I think he makes a point.

Philosophers throughout history have tried to figure out and understand God. In fact, a lot of the ways we talk about God are really more Greek philosophers' perspectives on God. I would prefer to look at scripture and see what scripture has to say about who God is. I struggle still because one of the things scripture says is God is spirit. And that clears everything up? I need to know how I can get a picture to describe what we're talking about when we say God is spirit. We all probably have some experiential sense of spirit, but to describe it or to make a picture description is pretty tough.

Another thing that I thought about doing was going through scripture and looking for the words “God is...” Now, what I found is that a lot of times when there was “God is” it

went on to say God is doing something. That's not quite what I was looking for. I was looking for times when it tells us what God actually is.

It's interesting to me that when Moses asked God, "Who do I say sent me?" God said, "Tell them I AM sent you." That's kind of like telling them existence sent you. God said, "I AM; I exist." It doesn't really tell us a whole lot except that it's perhaps beyond our understanding.

So there's all these Bible verses where I did find that God is: with you, helps you, is gracious, merciful, a righteous judge, our refuge and strength, the King, our salvation. What's interesting to me is that very few of these describe God in a physical way. Almost every one is about what God is in relationship to us—God is a righteous judge; God is our salvation; God is merciful. Those tell something about the character of God in relationship to us.

I will note that we could look through the Old Testament and notice that God gets angry. It was in the scripture today as well. What I would like to note is that's what people expected of a God—a God that was angry and fitful and never consistent. That was the cultural overlay that was there at the time. The interesting thing is to see how often the Old Testament goes against that kind of cultural overlay. How many times it talks about a God that is consistent; a God that has a love that is steadfast and forever; a God that is merciful; a God that cares about God's people. It's not just about appeasing God.

Look at the New Testament lesson we read today with the description of God as vine-grower. That's a real earthy kind of image, to think about God as one who is tending God's people, God's creation. That's a very different image than the images of the deities of old who were mercurial, jealous, and didn't really care about human beings, who were always trying to appease him. Instead, we have a description in the New Testament of a God who cares. God is love. I don't want to say that love is God.

We could go back and look at all of these "God is" statements. We don't say that God is fully one of these things. When we say God is love, what I would suggest is being said there is that God is one that, through a clear determination of will and judgment, decides to have an earnest and anxious desire for and an active and beneficent interest in the well-being of humans. That's a mouth-full, but the point is God cares for us, and chooses to do so and that's part of what God is, and it's incredible.

It allows us to recognize what Jesus goes on to say, that we as dependent beings need that tending. We need to know where we get the sustenance we need for living, the guidance we need to go forward. So we are invited to abide in him. We often talk about how we want to be independent, but the reality is we're never totally independent. We need the earth we live on for food, for water, for shelter, for a place to be. We are dependent creatures. If we really look at it, we are dependent on one another for the relationships we have, the love we share, the fellowship and how important that is to us

as well. It is indeed that abiding in God, in the love of God that is what's important for us.

Whenever I hear that we are invited to bear fruit, I can't help but think about the fruit of the Spirit description that's in Galatians. It begins to talk about what it means to abide in him and what will come forth from us as we do so. Now one of the reasons we can be reshaped in God's way is because, even as we think about who God is, God has recognized who we are.

We continually have tried to think about shaping God, appeasing God. When we look back, one of the things people did all the time was try to appease the gods to make sure everything happened the way they wanted it to happen. Why don't we tend to think about appeasing God anymore? Because God came to tell us, "I'm appeased. You don't have to do that." Isn't that what Jesus is partly about? He's the final sacrifice in that way. I think it is God's way of saying, "Get your minds off trying to appease me, control me, and listen instead to where I'm going to guide you in what you want to do. Think about my character, which is not something that needs to be appeased. I'm not out there trying to hurt you. I'm trying to tend you, guide you, encourage you." The interesting thing is we begin to think about God's character and how he wants us to reflect it. He wants us to show the love he's shown us. He doesn't want to be appeased. He invites us into a way of life, into away of being that's consistent with God's character.

Last week we looked at what Jesus was teaching and how it led us to love. This week I'm looking at God's character and I think where it leads us again is to look at the idea of love. If God is, that is, God exists, and scripture describes that God, what that God cares about is how we get along. What that God cares about is how we share our lives together. What that God cares about is each of us and who we are together. God's not partial. That was one of the "God is" statements—God is not partial. We see it in Deuteronomy and, much later, in Acts as Peter discovered it again.

Thinking about God's character can seem like an academic exercise or something that's way out there, but when it comes down to it, it is what God wants to be shown in our lives. It's what he wants our walk to be. In today's world that's a challenge. It challenges the evil of racism. It challenges the evil of oppression. It challenges the evil of division and asks us instead to be united in love.

I don't know exactly how God sees us—each of us unique and yet all of us together. The truth is God loves all of us and wants us all to be God's children, to reflect God's character in the world, and in doing so, to be the children of God. I don't understand our world because it's very clear to me what God wants of us. God wants us to contend with evil and to bring to the world those things that are good, that deserve praise, that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and honorable. How many times does scripture describe who God invites us to be, because it reflects who God is. And God invites us to be his children.

One of the “God is-es” is God is light. And in being God’s People of the Way we become the light of God shining into our world. It is as we stand with people who need to be stood with, as we stand with people in grief, as we stand with people who are oppressed, as we stand with people who are lost or lonely, as we stand with all of God’s people we become the very light of God in a world that needs that light, but we don’t become God.

God is not partial to people, but our need for God is not partial either. To be the light of God, we need God and we need to stay in touch. We do that together as we worship God, as we study scripture, as we go in service, as we take what we know of the love of God that God has given us and try to reflect it in the daily lives we lead to the people in the office, to the people on the street, to the people in the coffee shops, to the people in our families, to people. Amen.