

All Saints 2023

We are made in the image of God, but often, we try to make God in our image.

We assume, in other words, that God is like a more powerful version of our own parents.

This misleads us even if we had stable, loving parents,

and if we had a narcissistic parent, we may end up thinking that God is playing gotcha games with us to see whether we can be tricked into doing something wrong.

I remember a young man who claimed that God had placed dinosaur bones on earth to fool the weak minded into an eternity in hell.

When we imagine God in our image, we go down the wrong path.

There are three remarkable differences between God and human beings in today's readings alone.

We see the first difference in John's description of heaven.

There he witnesses "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages."

When *we* chose friends, we often select people we think are like us, sometimes just on the surface, but enough to make us feel a kind of superficial validation.

God, on the other hand, surrounds Godself with anyone and everyone who truly wants to be there.

People from all nations, ethnicities, and, dare we say, religions, end up in heaven.

And what does it mean to end up in heaven?

It means to be in relationship with God.

John describes these people as gathered around praising God.

That is to say, they are affirming God.

That is the sole requirement, and as I told you the last time that I spoke, God is love is relationship is honesty.

Perfection is not required, only a desire to succeed.

Basically, if we want a relationship, we have it, and then we can work on improving it.

This means that a person who severely injures others because he is misled still has hope if he longs for what is good.

He may have a lot of work to do, but God does not turn him away.

Who is absent from the scene?

Those who are not interested in God/relationship/love/honesty.

We choose friends based on similarity; God chooses everyone who wants to be chosen.

God is not like us.

This is good news for all of us.

Second, we think God rewards people in this life and the next for good behavior, just as our parents did.

We tell our children, if you eat your dinner, you can have dessert.

If you finish your homework, you can go to your friend's house.

Parents do so to teach their children responsibility, and that is a good thing, but God does not work that way.

We do not have to earn God's love, which is good news.

This frees us from thinking that we have to log sufficient hours praying, or we have to help an unknown number of people, or we have to believe the right theology or religion, or God will punish us.

When we think this way, we worry that we have not done enough.

In reality, things done to *earn* God's love do not contribute to a loving relationship.

Things done out of love are their own reward.

As for our theology, ideas are useful tools for this realm in which we all face various limitations and are forced to choose, but I am convinced that our theologies and philosophies and political theories are all useless at the throne of God.

This means there is no test before entering heaven other than a desire for God, for love.

No one will say, "Were you liberal or a conservative," or "What sect were you?"

It reminds me of the old joke by Emo Philips, who said:

"Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said,

"Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What

franchise?” He said, “Baptist.” I said, “Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?” He said, “Northern Baptist.” I said, “Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?”

He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist.” I said, “Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?”

He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.” I said, “Me, too!”

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?” He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.” I said, “Die, heretic!” And I pushed him over.”¹

This is how we humans think, not God.

God’s only question is, even though you may have stumbled often, do you long to be in relationship with me and others?

Third, in Matthew’s recounting of the beatitudes, notice that Jesus does not say, “Blessed are the healthy. Blessed are the popular. Blessed are the wealthy. Blessed are the beautiful. Blessed are the perfect.”

Nor does Jesus say, as a friend pointed out, that the poor and meek just need to buck up.²

¹ <https://shamelesspopery.com/the-funniest-religious-joke-of-all-time-or-a-painful-truth/>

² Bob Moore, as related by wife, Katherine, November 2, 2023.

Instead, Jesus assures us that all those who long for peace, who long for love, who long for righteousness are blessed.

We can be grateful that we experience these longings, which frees us from guilt and from counting our good deeds.

It frees us to use our gifts joyfully with others so that we can spread love and grace rather than promoting spiritual accounting tools by which we measure one another.

“Council of 1879 or 1912?”

People say that they are blessed because they have health or wealth or many friends, but in reality, blessing is not about worldly success.

To be blessed means that one longs to be in an ever deeper relationship with God, that one wants more truth, more love, more justice, more peace, and only God knows what is in the hearts of others.

All those who long for the very things that are often absent on this plane are on the salvation path, are developing a relationship with God.

When we pick up the newspaper and sigh sadly as we read about events in Maine or the near east or wherever people are suffering, we are expressing our desire for more truth, more love, more justice, more peace.

It has little to do with whose ideas are right, but whose hearts are longing.

The one thing that is similar in both the earthly and heavenly realm is relationships.

I remember overhearing my next-door neighbor's loud phone conversation in college.

When his friend on the other end of the phone objected to my neighbor's dating a

woman in high school, he proudly proclaimed, "I'm not going to marry her. I'm just dating her for the prestige of having a beautiful woman on my arm for the summer!"

Real friends love us not because of how we make them look or what they hope to gain

from us, but because of who we are, good and bad.

There is a saying in Spanish I once heard, that if you do not love someone's faults, then

you do not love them at all.

None of us are perfect.

We all are either cripplingly empathetic or lack empathy all together, or, if we happen to

land somewhere in the middle of *that* spectrum, then we are either too rigid or too relaxed.

No one is in the middle of every spectrum.

We all are too something, and that is just how God made us.

We learn from being among all sorts of different people, we learn how to put the

relationship first.

I will always be that person who loves order and fears disorder, but I pray that I will learn more and more to tolerate some disorder when it benefits my relationship with another human being.

It is challenging to get our heads around the notion that God is not like people, not like our parents, but it is well worth the effort.

We learn to embrace the ever-present love of God that no one can lose no matter what we do.

We are free to stray away from God and not experience that love, but we cannot lose it.

It can be hard to accept that God loves murderers as much as God loves us (of course, David, Moses, and St. Paul were murderers).

It requires holding in tension two of God's qualities, love and justice.

It can be difficult, but in the end, that is the only way that *we* can fully embrace God's love of *ourselves*.

Otherwise, we think we have to earn God's love, and are never quite sure that we have done so.

We either love all of someone, or none of someone; either all are embraced, or none are.

We struggle to do this, but God does not.