

God's Ministers

4th Sunday after the Epiphany

1-31-10

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First, I want to ask you, have you ever wondered what God looks like? Now I'm talking about God the Creator. We can all visualize what Jesus, God the Son, looked like. We know that he was born in the Middle East so he was probably a Caucasian and probably had an olive complexion and dark hair. We know he was born a male and we know what baby boys look like—as when Jesus was placed in the manger. And we know what adolescent boys look like—as when Jesus was talking with the elders in the temple. And we know what young men in their early 30s look like—as when Jesus was living his teaching, preaching, healing ministry. And we can guess that he was in pretty good physical shape because he and his friends walked everywhere. And we can guess that he wore a beard because writings from that period talk about the Israelite men being bearded. We can picture Jesus clearly enough that we can even depict him in art. Look at our stained glass windows and you can see how most of us picture Jesus.

But how about God the Creator? Well, that's a little harder. Most of us are familiar with the picture Michelangelo painted on the

ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of the hand of God giving life to Adam. God is pictured with a long flowing beard and lots of flowing white hair; he's attired in a white robe and is surrounded by lots of little angels—probably cherubim. But is that what God really looks like? I tried going to the Bible to get clues about what God might look like. Right there, in the story of the creation in Genesis, Chapter 1, verse 26 I read that “Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” Well, okay then. That clears it up, doesn't it? Now I knew that if I had any artistic ability I would be able to take a palette and brush or a box of pastels or a stick of charcoal and draw a pretty accurate picture of God. After all, we know that God is a man, a male, and we know that God is a Caucasian, and we know that God is just over 6 feet tall, and we know that God struggles to keep his weight at about 218 pounds and we know that God is mostly bald and the hair that he has left is pretty gray. And we know that God expresses God's sexuality as a heterosexual. It's as though I could take a telescope and point it up toward heaven and see God clearly. But wait. Maybe I'm not looking at the whole picture here. Maybe I'm looking through the wrong end of the telescope and rather than seeing the fullness of God I'm only looking at a very thin slice. Is it possible that God might be a woman? Is it possible that God might be Asian or African American or American Indian?

Do you think it's possible that God might be less than 5 feet tall instead of being over 6 feet tall? Could God be skinny or maybe obese? And what if God has blond hair or black hair or brown hair or red hair or white hair or even no hair at all? And is it possible that to God the expression of love in a committed relationship could as easily be homosexual as heterosexual? I finally figured it out. God made all of humankind in God's image—and limited because the vastness of just who and what God is, I tried to make God in my image. The truth, the very basic truth, is that God created every one of us—male and female, white and brown and black and yellow and red, tall and short, slight and heavy, intellectually, physically and athletically gifted and intellectually and physically challenged, heterosexual, homosexual, bi-sexual and transgendered—in God's own image. We're all the same. God loves each and every one of us because each and every one of us is a reflection of the image of God. We all have gifts, freely given from God, and we have obligations and responsibilities, too. The responsibility is to be ministers in God's community.

If we can accept the fullness and diversity of humankind as God created us, then we can make the transition to learning to communicate with each other.

Our readings today are all about communication. We human beings are communicators and we're driven to find ways to

communicate. For most of us the primary way is by words. We use words when we talk to each other. And we use words as we explore our path of communication with God. Some of us have the ability to communicate as visual artists or musicians and can speak by those mediums, but most of us use our words as the currency we spend in our dealings with each other.

Sometimes what God has in mind for each of us seems so big that we start to question our ability to do it. We question whether we have the ability and capacity to do the job. We might not think that we have the ability to communicate what it is that God's calling us to say and do.

Imagine poor Jeremiah. He was a young man minding his own business until God showed up with a particular task, a particular ministry for him to do. God called him to be God's prophet and to speak God's word to God's people. And not just that, God was calling him to such a responsibility that God would set him over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. Jeremiah resisted this call because he didn't think he was up to the task. In this morning's reading we hear God and Jeremiah talking to each other. God says "I picked you out, even before you were born, and chose

you to be my prophet.” And Jeremiah replied “No, wait, I don’t even know how to speak, I am only a youth.” And God said, “Don’t say that. You won’t be alone. To all whom I send you you will go and whatever I command you shall speak.” By this time Jeremiah was really fearful but God said to him “Do not be afraid for I am with you to deliver you.”

Jeremiah was one of the truly great prophets. He was successful but we know his success came, not from within himself, but from God’s word and God’s strength. And that’s what God had promised this reluctant prophet. The later chapters of the Book of Jeremiah make it clear that all of the power and success in Jeremiah’s life resulted from his new relationship with God. God promised him that he would always be with him and God taught him what to tell the people in God’s name. God gave Jeremiah work to do, but God also empowered Jeremiah with the strength and courage to do that work. Jeremiah learned to trust God’s assurance—that’s what the new relationship was all about.

Saint Paul also talked about communication in his letter to the church at Corinth. Today’s epistle reading is one that’s so familiar to many of us. It was one of the readings at Tish’s and my wedding 41 years ago and I imagine at some of your weddings,

too. The reading starts out with these words—if I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Jesus himself told us that the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all of our heart and soul and mind and to love our neighbor as our self.

So maybe that's what we're supposed to be hearing in our lessons today—a message of love. Human beings were born to love, just like we're born to communicate. We're born to love God, we're born to love people, and we're born to love the good gifts God has given us. You can't be a non-lover. You can be a good lover, you can be a bad lover, but you can't be a non-lover. You're born to give love abundantly after the same fashion that God loves us abundantly.

So the question is, how do we communicate this love? We are all called into a relationship with God in the same way that Jeremiah was. And our relationship is just as challenging as Jeremiah's was for him. The key to that relationship is that it's a dialogue, a conversation. If we only have a monologue, either doing all of the talking or doing all of the listening, it limits our vision of what God might have in store for us. If we're in dialogue God can tell us that God will be with us, that God will sustain us, and that God will

love us as no other. That's what God told Jeremiah and that's what God tells us when we're open to listening.

Through our baptism God calls us to serve. We're called to love and nurture what is good. We're called to mend and help transform what is weak or broken. We are called into God's household—every single one of us.

Some of us will respond eagerly to God's call. Some of us might be less eager. Most of us will probably be somewhat reluctant, at least at first, just like Jeremiah was. It can be tempting to find a reason not to continue the journey of faith and commitment to which we feel God calling us:

*I'm too old or too young

*I don't speak well or know enough

*I'm too busy

*I can't do that

*It must not really be God calling

*I can serve, but not now, maybe later

But if we keep that open dialogue with God we can learn to respond positively as Jeremiah did. And we can learn that because we, too, are assured that the same God who calls us to do a task always remains with us and sustains us.

God, in whose name we are baptized, continually speaks to us. This communication comes through the church, through the Scriptures and sacraments, through our prayers and through the voice of the Spirit that surrounds us at all times. And God speaks to us at unexpected moments—through the beauty of the world around us, through the touch and voice of other people, and even in the silences of trials and troubles.

The God who has called us is always with us, speaking, if we will listen and accept the communication. God, who is always there for us, will give us God's love and support and nourishment—in the same way God give it to Jeremiah.

God is abundant in God's love. If you went into God's kitchen you'd see your picture on a magnet on the refrigerator. The simple truth is that God loves each of us as if there was only one of us.

We are, each and every one of us, God's ministers. So I invite you to examine your own heart—how have you exercised your ministry this week? Have you been a good communicator and a good lover, open in dialogue with God and listening for the ways God has in mind for you to serve in the world?

Will you pray with me? *Lord God, help us always to remember that what we are is your gift to us and what we make of it is our gift back to you. And we can all say together, Amen.*