

“What Is God Like?”

Luke 15:1-10

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We have been exploring the meanings of God’s Kingdom through Jesus’ parables. Today is the last Sunday that we will speak about Jesus’ teaching of God and God’s Kingdom. Christianity is certainly a Christ-centered faith in God. We believe that God is manifested in Christ Jesus’ new understandings, teachings and his ministries. Are we clearly understanding about the nature of our God, at least, are we on the same page of Jesus’ teachings about our God? Let’s think about this question together: *What Is God Like?* This morning, we will learn a new understanding of our God through the story of the lost sheep.

I assume that everyone has a different image, understanding, and expectation of God. It may sound strange to you, but think about what images of God you have. Some of you believe that God is all-loving, some of you think that God is all-powerful. When I lead our preschool chapel every other Friday, I always begin our chapel service lighting a small candle. I tell our children that the light reminds us of God. Even in our Sunday morning worship, our acolytes bring light into our service, which reminds us that God is here with us. In academia, God-talk is called “Theology.” The Greek word, *Theo* means God, the word, *logy* means knowledge. God in Christianity has been understood and described as many different ways by many theologians. First, let me share a couple of perspectives on God with you.

In 1963, Anglican church Bishop John Robinson published a controversial book, “Honest to God”. In his book, Robinson proposed abandoning the notion of a God "out there", existing somewhere out in the universe as a "Cosmic supremo." So have we already abandoned the idea of God "up there", the notion of the old man up in the sky? In its place Robinson offered a reinterpretation of God, whom he defined as "Love." He wrote: "For it is in making himself nothing, in his complete self-surrender to others in love, that Jesus discloses and lays bare the Ground of man's being as Love".

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, suggested that the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world are inseparable. He argued that there are not two realities but one, that God is truly revealed in the reality of the world. Because God and Christ's relationship has been drawn into our reality, humans, and Christ are able to encounter each other only in this world. Christians have a positive relationship to the world. In his letters from prison, which were later published in "Prisoner for God", Bonhoeffer writes about a **religion-less Christianity**. He views the modern world, which is no longer in need of God, not from the point of view of an almighty God, but instead solely from the perspective of a suffering Christ. God wants us not to be dependent only on the almighty God. Thus in place of the almighty God, there is the weak and suffering God

Alfred North Whitehead, a British philosopher, once distinguished between the two natures of God as "God as Caesar" and "God as Fellow-Sufferer." These terms adeptly describe the two different sides of God, His transcendent and imminent nature. The image of *God as Caesar* is that of Divine King, Sovereign Lord and Creator of the Universe, who sits upon a heavenly throne from where every event on earth is willed. All creation is this God's Kingdom. This side of God is above the world, apart from human history and aloof from human suffering, tragedy and loss. *God as Fellow-Sufferer* is another view of God, as companion, friend and fellow sojourner with each human being. This God is involved in the world and, therefore, knows intimately the pain and suffering of all living beings. This is the tender side of God, the feelings side of God, the God who listens to prayers and who suffers with and for people. This God feels what we feel, weeps as we weep.

So what did Jesus tell about God? Let us revisit our Scripture reading and listen to Jesus' teaching. It reads, "Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it?" Does this explanation make sense to you? How come the shepherd doesn't care about the other ninety-nine sheep, but leaves for the lost one? Some theologians argue that there must be two shepherds who guarded the sheep, so it would be okay to have the other shepherd go after the lost one. But there is no explanation on this view in the Bible. What is the point of this story? What did Jesus want to show his disciples and friends about God?



In this story, the image of the shepherd is not one of a security guard who just goes around a fence and finds the lost sheep. Jesus describes God as a responsible shepherd who is committed to search for the lost one even in the wilderness no matter what it takes. I want to show you a picture that I found related to our story. (a visual image on the screen, Alfred Usher Soord, 1868-1915, a British painter) What images do you see in this picture? The shepherd is portrayed as tough and faithful rescuing his sheep. First, we picture our shepherd as a compassionate and faithful one who reaches out to a lost one in every circumstance. Secondly, this shepherd is willing to take any risk and never gives up no matter what it costs. Lastly, the shepherd wants to rescue the lost one not for purposes of business, but for affection out of his love. Love doesn't see others as an object, but a subject. Here the shepherd feels for the lost one and knows intimately the pain and suffering. He commits whatever efforts that he can for the lost one. If the shepherd is a business oriented man or judge, he would have abandoned the lost one. But Jesus taught his friends and us to have a new experience of God: God as fellow-sufferer. Our God is a companion as friend and family who is with us especially in our time of hardships and suffering.

We were saddened to hear that the Rohwer's daughter Jane passed away. She was just in the forties. I couldn't find any words to comfort their loss. We also heard that that Virginia Wells' son Ed Wells died last Sunday during surgery. What Is God Like when we are sorrowful, in despair and going through challenges in our life? I believe that our God is involved in the process of life, rather than watching from above it. Our God is a comforter who helps us in our trials, rather than the one who brings on our trials. Our God weeps as we weep. Jesus challenges us to receive a new experience of God who is a shepherd like in the picture. God never gives you up! God will continue to spend hours and days searching for you wherever you. God is so good and compassionate. God is what we experience and encounter in our church community and faith journey. God is good all the time. All the time God is good! Amen.