

Is God Unchanging?

You may know the old hymn:

*Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not;
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be.*

To be honest, when we describe God -- what God is like, what God does or God's nature -- we are doing theology. It's not an objective description of God but a statement of what God means to us. It is beyond our ability to know God in any objective sense. What we believe about God reflects us and our own life experiences.

What does the Bible tell us about God? It tells us that God is eternal, unchanging, unchangeable: "I the Lord do not change." (Malachi 3:6) "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning." (James 1:17)

It makes sense to me to think of God as Eternal, unchangeable in nature and in essence. God's nature and being are infinite, eternal: "in the beginning, God..." (Genesis 1) There always has been God and always will be God -- God's wisdom undiminished, God's love eternal. And yet, reading the Bible from start to finish, there is a clear change in the perception of God -- even of God's personality. The New Testament ends with God creating a *new heaven and a new earth*. "See, I am making all things new." (Rev. 21: 5) "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22: 13)

Meister Eckhart tells us that God always the newest thing. And that leads to today's question: "There is a certain benefit and comfort in viewing God as consistently available, loving, renewing and forgiving. There seems to be little benefit in God being immutable. If a major part of knowing God is being in a living relationship with God, then shouldn't God be somehow affected by that relationship? Aren't intercessory prayers based on the belief we can somehow affect God to respond to our lives? If God is immutable then why create humans, the universe or anything that is dynamic and, growing, and evolving? God is not only mutable but evolving as well."

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the struggle for civil rights in the United States through non-violent protest. His expanded vision, that racial equality also included economic justice, cost him his life in 1968. Yet, his life had already been offered up—given to that new vision of what he believed. He lived it in the power of faith. King's cry, "Let freedom ring," echoed the very best of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic belief that, in God, there is no segregation. All people are equally valuable.

So, whether or not God ever changes, people do. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, there is growth in the understanding of what people believe about God. There are some pretty radical shifts in understanding along the way. Many prophets of ancient Israel, in response to the reality of exile, proclaimed that God was doing a new thing! Jesus virtually exploded the old paradigm built around a system of sacrifices and other ways to appease God. He spoke as one who knew about God's essential nature. As a result, we have received the tradition that God is an active presence in time and space through people and is the God of all people. Jesus' message is clearly that of liberation and acceptance for all.

The Apostle Peter found a new belief about God. He had a vision in which God commanded him to eat non-kosher food as a sign that whatever God makes acceptable, no one can make unacceptable.

The Apostle Paul also came to a new understanding of God. Though trained as a Pharisee, he championed the understanding that new Christians did not have to become Jewish first! He believed fervently in grace as a gift to all people. This was a radical change for the dogmatic and judgmental Paul.

Peter and Paul proclaimed to Jewish Christians that God does not care about race, gender, or any other differences between people. As a result, we have learned that God is actively present in time and space through people – is the God of all people. Jesus' message was clearly of liberation and inclusion for all.

What do you believe about God? What do you say is God's essential nature? Is God all-powerful? How about all-knowing? Is God all-present? Would you describe God as perfect love or as the ultimate creator? Natural disasters, the suffering of innocents, and the deadly conflicts between peoples of faith around world and even here in the United States challenge us in terms of our understanding of God. The ancient question still haunts us: "How can an all-powerful, all-knowing, and good God allow this? How can we worship a God like that?"

One option in response to these questions is that God seems to be good, but not all-powerful or all-knowing—essentially not really GOD. Another option is that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, but not good, at least the way we tend to define *good*. A third option is to consider a different understanding of God altogether. It is perhaps with this third option that we can best answer the ancient question posed above. There is a well-known story about a group of people describing an elephant, having never before seen one, using only their sense of touch. None of them had the complete picture. Each touched a part. In addition, they had to describe what they were feeling in concepts and language they already knew. We understand God only in part and our descriptions always use terms and concepts we already know. We are reminded that our understanding of God, our interpretations of the experiences we have of the divine, are not identical with who God is. In large measure, they reflect us: our own experiences, fears, and insights. (attributed to Jalaludin Rumi as retold by Francis Dewar, *Invitations*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone Road, London NW1 4DU, 1996, 49.)

We understand God only in part and our descriptions always use terms and concepts we already know – for example, changing or not changing, immutable or evolving. Our understanding of God, our interpretations of the experiences we have of the divine, is not identical with who God is. In large measure, our sense of God actually reflects us: our own experiences, fears, and insights.

I'll venture that most of us who believe in God also believe that everything is within God – that is no place outside God. The word *God* means reality itself and not a particular being in time or space -- not a "being" *per se*. No one can stand and observe God objectively. God cannot be known that way. At the same time, God is personal, available for relationship, and knowable subjectively -- in relationship. This kind of understanding helps me to see myself and my life more clearly in relation to what is ultimate. We are all within God and God is within us. The universe reveals God to us.

Theology is a mirror of our own souls. What we trust and how we determine the basis of that trust is a reflection of who we are. We tend to shape who our God is on the basis of our own experience. Let us, therefore, approach the knowing of who God is with deference and humility. This *knowing* is not having a knowledge of ideas or doctrines. This is a truth only known in relationship -- a knowledge that is lived. God *is!*

What we think about God is important because it reflects our worldview: how we relate to others. Faith is more than a thought process. It involves our trust: how we view life and our commitments. The essential questions are: "where will we place our trust and how will that affect how we live?" So we learn to ask honest questions and to live patiently and devotedly into the answers. Faith invites and challenges us to commit our lives to refining our questions and embracing the answers we know. As we seek to live in the divine presence, we experience that we're living in relationship with ultimate truth, with God, and our living will bless others -- will bless all creation.

If this description reflects your understanding of God and your faith journey, then you need to be engaged in this faith community. Crossroads Church needs you. We want to share this good news about God and us with the entire world starting with each other and the community around us. Our mission is to reach in and reach out in the Spirit and to share the love Jesus showed us.

Your presence in worship helps you grow and strengthen your life's foundation. You also encourage those around you as you reach out in love. It multiplies the Spirit's love among us and helps each of us share that love more powerfully through the week. The invitation I offer you today is to act: the action of making or renewing your commitment to your journey of faith through Crossroads Church.

Do you ever wonder why we're here -- why this amazing and unique community of faith came into being and is still thriving at the corner of 79th & Main? God is doing a new thing here through this church and through each of us. We are here to be a sign to show that following Jesus means asking our questions, trusting our wisdom, walking through our fears, and devoting our whole selves to the journey. We are here so that we can touch Kansas City and all the world around us with the love of God through Christ. And God is love -- a loving nature that never changes. This is love that is always new.