

**Sermon for October 18, 2020 – Pentecost 20, Year A**  
**Exodus: 33:12-23, Matthew 22:15-22**

Gosh, our species loves certainty. We humans love to solve mysteries, to bring the cosmos into human grasp, to understand what makes us tick, from the tiniest cell in our body to the dynamics of international relations. And wouldn't we love to crack the ins and outs of God. To, in effect, possess God by bringing him, her and they into the range of our human understanding. But God – despite our best, or sometimes worst, efforts – will not and cannot be pinned down. And that's as it should be.

But still, we try. I know I can relate to poor old Moses in the Exodus reading. He says to God "See, you have told me to bring up this people from Sinai to the promised land, but you haven't told me who is going to go with me. You have said, I know you by name and you have found favour in my sight, but if that's the case, then show me your ways, so that I may know you." Moses wants to know God as intimately as God knows him. And he wants some tangible assurance that God is going to accompany the Israelites out of Sinai; Moses asks how otherwise shall it be known that they are distinct from every people on the face of the earth?

This need not just for an exclusive relationship with the adored, but to be seen to have that special status, also seems to be a human characteristic. Just think about the myriad number of ways we crave special, intimate relationships in our lives, relationships in which we feel ourselves chosen and beloved, and in that, distinct from all others?

I remember well my youngest son often bodily taking my head and turning it toward him if it was facing too long toward his older brothers instead of him. And my sister and I (mostly tongue in cheek) often introduce ourselves as Mom's favourite daughter, to the extent that Mom has given up and gives us matching "you're my favourite daughter" greeting cards to keep us happy.

In fact, I had two dogs that behaved that way, too, Genny the big Bernese Mountain dog who just couldn't bear us patting Toby the Shih'tzu, and who would heave herself to her feet and lumber over from the other side of the house to insert her giant nose into the middle of things to disrupt the proceedings and divert our attention to her. And perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker that always makes me laugh: Jesus loves you ... but I'm his favourite." We all have a craving to be uniquely known and loved, by a parent, a friend, a mentor, a spiritual companion, by God.

And so we try to capture and lock down that special relationship to assure ourselves it won't ever go away. You have likely heard of the hundreds of thousands of amorous couples around the world who have taken this endeavour literally and fastened a "love lock" (a padlock with their initials on it) to a fence, or bridge, or gate, then thrown away their key as a public statement of their sure and certain faith that their relationship is inviolable.

Now, who knows how many of those relationships have in fact continued to survive and thrive, but we do know that some of these over-padlocked structures have begun to groan under the weight of all that blasted certainty, with the Pont des Arts in Paris in fact suffering a partial collapse as a result. What an interesting metaphor to consider; that the bridge we count on to get us safely to the other side in fact cannot do so if we have overloaded it with ideas made, literally, ironclad. What might that suggest about the life of faith?

God tries, I think, to nudge us away from our attempts to capture and cement things in black and white. When Moses wants assurance of a special, distinctive relationship, God refuses to sign on the dotted line. God says, in effect, "Listen, I'm going to be gracious to whom I am gracious, and show mercy to whom I show mercy." And yes, I do love you, and I will show you my glory, but I won't let you see my face – because ultimate knowledge of God is beyond any human.

Now, in the gospel reading we have a group of Pharisees and Herodians trying to pin down God-in-Jesus for a less benign reason. They are trying to back Jesus into a corner by forcing him to voice an unequivocal statement about taxation that could put him at odds with the emperor Tiberius. He can (a) endanger himself with the Roman authorities by claiming everything is owed only to God, or (b) he can alienate the overtaxed Jewish population by endorsing the Roman tax. But Jesus will not allow himself to be boxed in, to be put on one side of the fence or the other. He acknowledges the reality of the emperor's claim to people's pocketbook, while at the same time implying that far more is owed to God that can ever be captured by mere coinage.

Jesus, as always, forces us to think. What is it, then, that God wants from us; what tangible or intangible elements of our lives? As one commentator noted on this passage: "All of us have fine lines to walk in negotiating the various kinds of commerce that fill our days... [here we have] Jesus' refusal to make the conundrum of daily rendering into an easy question. The answers are simple only for those who regard Caesar as God, or as the devil. Meanwhile, we bear God's image – as the palm of God's hand bears ours." (Isa. 49:15-16)

So both of today's readings remind me to embrace the complexity of God. While the Church can, and does, have sacred words, images and faith stories that help us understand and live into our relationship with God, we must resist the temptation to shrink God into those narratives; to lull ourselves into thinking we have pinned God down for once and for all.

It is hard for humans to live with ambiguity; we crave black-and-white certainties for good, understandable reasons. Agreeing on ready answers brings individuals and communities a sense of belonging, of identity, of safety. There are many denominations, in Christianity and in other faiths, that offer clear-cut statements of belief and definitions of the divine that are there for the taking and not up for

discussion. What is sinful and who is saved is clearly laid out, and the impression of security that this offers is a mighty big draw – we can all point to megachurches that attract thousands of followers. But remember the Pont des Arts; the bridge that collapsed under the weight of too much certainty. Failing to keep hearts and minds open to an evolving understanding of God can, for many people, ultimately lead to a terminal crisis of faith when their life experience no longer fits the fixed image they have created of God.

It is for this reason that I am grateful for the Anglican church's tolerance – and often even appreciation – for a range of views in the pews, and even the pulpits. The Anglican church does not demand that we all agree; it recognizes that as individuals we will at times have differently shaded understandings of scripture, of God, and of Christ, and it knows that those views will likely change over the course of one's lifetime. By being in community with each other in an environment that, one hopes, fosters honest reflection and wrestling with questions and wonderings, we keep each other from being lulled into the complacent belief that we have God all sorted out.

Our creeds unite us – but we are welcome to keep engaging with them at an ever-deepening level. The stories from scripture unite us; we are the family that sits around a campfire while the same tale is told year after year, and as we listen we see new thoughts and images flickering at us from the flames. Our rituals unite us; our shared bread at the Eucharist brings home to us that we are all parts of the one Body, however diverse we may be. Our liturgies, beginning with the Book of Common Prayer and adapted in years since, unite us; they give us words and a structure that offer us a place to meet and to let the prayers carry us, whether we bring hearts that are feeling hopeful, muddled, joyous, or confident; whether we are in a spiritual desert or whether we are in the midst of one of those mystical mountaintop moments.

There will always be a need for a denomination like ours, because there will always be people who need to keep asking the big questions, who reject the pull of false certainties, and who are happy to continue the tradition of weighing different spiritual perspectives and viewpoints, a tradition that began in the Bible itself and carried on robustly in the early Christian church – hence one reason behind our three different creeds.

I appreciate, so much, all of you who walk this path with me, in this place. I enjoy your unique perspectives, the different traditions you hold dear, the way you think of something I never would have, and the way you encourage me to be the person I am slowly and steadily finding myself to be, quirks and all. If I were to offer this as a stewardship moment, I would tell you with great enthusiasm how much membership in this community, surrounded by people who have supported my vocation and inspired me with theirs, has meant to me.

I don't think St. Clement's is designed to ever be a megachurch. And that's OK. We are here to worship together, to support each other, to learn from each other, and to do that with our hearts and minds focused on a God whose eludes full understanding but whose love is made real through life in Christ and in community. We are here to figure out together, over and over again, what it is to give to God the things that are God's. One thing we do know for certain is that our chief task in this life and the next is to love God and to love our neighbour. Thank you for helping me learn how to do that better. Amen.

*- The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen*

*Dedicated to the glory of God and in loving memory of the Ven. Alick McDonald Trendell, who died 45 years ago today; a man who brought love, light and laughter to many.*