

CONGREGATION
InFormation

Week 2
Identity

Who is God? Who are we?

Our image of God determines how we pray and what we pray for. It determines not only how we see God, but how we see ourselves.

Every image of God is limited; God is beyond our human definition. Still, we need to have an image of God to which we can relate somehow. For many of us, our earliest image of God was as a person, especially a father. This is a rich and biblical image, and inherent in God as Father is our identity as children. However, this image can be distorted if we think of a father as harsh, authoritarian, or judgmental. If we assign these characteristics to God, then we become frightened children--cowed, passive, and rule-bound in our relationship with God. Images of lover, healer, mother can open up an understanding of God who seeks, heals, nurtures, and protects us. Abstract images of light, color, or love can free us from trying to make God into a human being. German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, "We are shaped and fashioned by what we love." God is the things that are life-giving, and in loving relationships. No single image of God is complete for all that we need for all of our lives; this is why the Bible presents so many metaphors for God. The images which are most meaningful to us will shape who we become in Christian formation.

Take 10 minutes or so early in the week to recall your earliest image of God; write it down.

Through the week consider: Who was I in relationship to that image of God? Do I have the same image now? How has it changed? Has my relationship to God changed? What do I most long for from God?

Allow at least 15-20 minutes for the following exercise in "praying with color":

Find a piece of blank paper and markers, colored pencils, or whatever colors you have. Take five minutes and close your eyes, relax and calm your thoughts. Think about how you have experienced God in the past week. When you're ready, open your eyes and draw whatever colors and shapes express that experience. Don't worry about your artistic ability! Post the drawing somewhere you'll see it. If you can, share what you felt with someone you trust.

FURTHER

Information

Mature faith has a different understanding of God than fledgling faith. In his book, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, James Fowler identifies different stages of faith and how they effect our knowledge and values.

Primal Faith: The earliest experiences of a child and her primary caregivers, which teach her to trust or mistrust the world. Doesn't differentiate between her needs and herself.

Intuitive-Projective Faith: Begins at around age two when a child begins to use language and form images which hold together his worlds of meaning and wonder; uses symbols to try to bring meaning to life and asks questions about death. Values reassurance and guidance.

Mythic-Literal Faith: By school age (6 or 7), a child's thinking typically becomes more linear and orderly. She can understand and tell a story with beginning, middle, and end. Family and faith community are defined by stories, and which stories they share. Rules and a sense of fairness are important. Values concrete and literal explanations.

Synthetic-Conventional Faith: Typically begins in early adolescence when a child moves from concrete objects and representations to abstractions and imaginative thinking. He begins to draw together a "story of my stories" to give meaning to life in general and to his own life in particular. Values the faith he has been given by others.

Individuative-Reflective Faith: Develops when individual experiences cause a person to examine and make critical choices about her identity and faith. What was once assumed about self and faith are re-examined. Beliefs, values, and commitments become a matter of choice rather than uncritical acceptance.

Conjunctive Faith: This usually happens after mid-life. The experience of an adult living with the tension of who he is as well as who he wants to be, caring for adolescent children and aging parents, coming to terms with aging, experiencing the death of parents or peers. Involves the integration of polarities—the "conjunction of opposites." Deep commitment to own faith allows for genuine openness to other points of view.

Universalizing Faith: The rare individual who is so grounded in the source of faith that his own causes, institutions, attachments, and possessions are not needed to give life value. Value comes from total and pervasive response to the radical love of God. Christian tradition has named these people saints.

Consider the following questions:

What images of God have been most meaningful to me in different stages of faith? What images of God are most meaningful to me now? What do I long for from God?