

## “Finding God in the Waves: The God We Can Know”

1 John 4:7-12

In his book *Do I Stay Christian?* Brian McLaren tells this story as told by Michael Luo about Frederick Douglass when he was enslaved by Thomas Auld who became a Christian after a conversion experience at a Methodist camp in 1832:

Douglas had harbored the hope that Auld’s conversion...might lead him to emancipate his slaves, or at least “make him more kind and humane.” Instead, Douglas writes, “If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways.” Auld was ostentatious about piety -- praying ‘morning, noon, and night,’ participating in revivals, and opening his home to traveling preachers –but he used his faith as license to inflict pain and suffering upon his slaves. “I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture – ‘He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.’”

How could faith in God be so misguided? When we look at the impact of religion on people, it is a mixed bag at best. Our mission statement is “Transforming lives by sharing the love of God in our communities.” We truly believe that sharing the love of God can help transform lives. Yet, it is hard to deny that the Christian faith has not always lived up to its ideals of love and compassion. McLaren writes, “Christianity has become the world’s largest, wealthiest, most powerful religion...The religion has failed to transform surprisingly high numbers of its adherents into Christlike people...*why do so many Christians change so little?*”

Sometimes we are told that it is our lack of faith or spiritual practice that is stopping us from being transformed into the likeness of Christ. But the answer might be in our image, understanding, and experience of God. Oftentimes we project onto God images of anger, judgment, and fear. This leads us to believe that God is angry at us and is always ready to punish us for any disobedience. The image of the angry and distant God clings to our brains and makes us stuck in more stress and anger. This image/experience of God activates our amygdala which leads us to be less forgiving, less flexible, and less trusting. For centuries, Christians have been taught or have taught others that God would punish our infractions, even though we are told that God loves us unconditionally.

When we experience God as an angry and judgmental deity, we tend to forget what Jesus came to teach us. This is what I believe the author of 1 John 4 was trying to remind the followers of Jesus as they seemed to have forgotten that unconditional love was the focus of the Christian life. The time of the writing of the

letter is around or after the year 100 CE. The Christian movement was entering its second century and already had had a major division. It was first started as a branch of Judaism but soon after was kicked out of the synagogue and the separation was complete. In addition, there were different teachings about Jesus and what it meant to follow him. There were different philosophies competing to define the main ways to understand the faith. But the author of our text for today was proposing something completely different from all the theological and philosophical debates and divisions of his time. This letter which is written more like a sermon for a general audience was calling the followers of Christ to focus on the centrality of love for the Christian faith. Love was the answer which the author of 1 John was proposing for the early Christians. This was not some easy answer that he was proposing. It is not a call to just get along with others. He was challenging his audience to get off their high moral and theological horses to truly follow Jesus with sacrificial acts of love. They needed to shift their focus from conflict to practices of love.

The wisdom he was offering was tough because it is much easier to talk about the faith than to practice it. It is much easier to “defend” the boundaries of the “true” faith than to live out the high calling of Christ for unconditional love in our daily living for ourselves and for our neighbors. It is tempting to stay with the “fear of God” where we label people according to our likes and dislikes. It is hard to keep our focus on love, especially when love requires letting go of our judgment. The true measure of our faith is not theological or doctrinal correctness but true love for Christ and for the world which Christ loved and redeemed. The three indicators which the author of this letter gives to us to measure our faith are: 1. Being awakened to God’s love in all creation. 2. Being committed to loving others, both believers and nonbelievers (meaning those we agree with and those we don’t agree with). 3. Sharing our resources with the poor. Only love is strong enough to transform us into the likeness of Christ!

We can experience God if we focus on love. The God we can know is the energy of love that pulses throughout the universe. Even though the illusion of the angry and judgmental God looms large because of our history, we are encouraged by the words of scriptures, the experiences of our hearts, and the examples of Jesus and of truly courageous Christians who followed the way of unconditional love.

We will end with a prayer by Isaac Gaff based on the last half of Galatians 5:

Breathe in affection for others  
Breathe out the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival  
Breathe in exuberance about life  
Breathe out frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness  
Breathe in serenity

Breathe out the stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage  
Breathe in a willingness to stick with things  
Breathe out small-minded and lopsided pursuits  
Breathe in a sense of compassion in the heart  
Breathe out cutthroat competition  
Breathe in a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people  
Breathe out ugly parodies of community  
Breathe in loyal commitments  
Breathe out an impotence (unwillingness) to love or be loved  
Breathe in not needing to force our way in life  
Breathe out all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants  
Breathe in marshaling and directing our energies wisely  
Breathe out uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions. Amen.

The Universal Christ: <https://youtu.be/TcoN2K5alkU>: The work of Christ in the world.

Transcription:

Just like the very first moment,  
When time and space exploded into being,  
My life, just as it is right now,  
is a perfect expression of Divine Love.

--Every dark night, every sunrise,  
every back step, every happiness.

Like the stars, the  
moon, the Earth, the trees  
The oceans, the creatures,  
and all human beings past, present, and future  
--Everything visible, without exception,  
is the outpouring of God.

The first cries of a newborn, Skyscrapers at night, The memory of a kiss, Blooming wildflowers after a forest fire, A cup of coffee, rice and beans, The quiet hum of a washing machine, Dancing barefoot, Patterns on the wings of butterflies, The gifts of healing passed down from my ancestors, The sound of a drum, and the hands that strike it.

In all of creation, there  
is a unifying heartbeat  
One word for it is Christ  
It includes everyone, excludes no one.

Christ is not Jesus's last name,  
but the blueprint for all of reality,  
For the Big Bang and everything after.

Christ is wherever ordinary  
matter and spirit meet.  
Christ is wherever the  
Divine unites with the human.

Jesus broke bread, and said, "This is my body."  
He lifted a cup, and said, "This is my blood."  
God loves things by becoming them.  
By taking on physicality, flesh, tears, blood

The body of Christ is not somewhere out there,  
It's in you.  
It's in me.  
Here and now.

Christ in the high school student afraid to go back to school; Christ in the heart of a woman marching for change; Christ in the gay couple searching for a church; Christ in the inmate alone in her cell; Christ in the immigrant family waiting under a blue tarp; Christ in the soldier a long way from home; Christ in the one who hears voices, diagnosed with mental illness; Christ in the single mother-to-be; Christ in the black father teaching his young son about race; Christ in whatever holds quarks together.

To be a Christian  
Is to see Christ in every thing.

"Incarnation is the oldest Christian story. Through Christ God is pouring God's self into all of creation. To be a Christian, then, is to see Christ in every one and every thing." -Richard Rohr