

So, today we are continuing our summer sermon series for August.

This series is congregational choice, meaning that each Sunday this month, you're hearing a sermon about a topic that was requested by someone in the congregation.

Today's topic is the question, "What does God look like?" and this question was asked by one of the younger members of our congregation.

Since a child posed the sermon topic, I figured I should start out my sermon by sharing the story of a child.

One day, a mother went into the room of her 8-year old daughter, who had a large piece of construction paper on the floor and was coloring on it.

"What are you doing?" her mother asked.

Without looking up the girl asserted, "I am drawing a picture of God."

"But honey," her mother replied gently, "No one really knows what God looks like."

This time, the girl stopped drawing, looked up at her mother, and with great confidence asserted, “They will when I am done with this picture.”

The truth is that we don’t really know what God looks like, because God is in everything.

God is in every atom and molecule that makes up the earth, the solar system, and other planets, the other galaxies, the whole universe.

God is in all that we can see, hear, taste and touch, and God is beyond our five senses.

God is in things that are so tiny they can only be seen through a microscope.

God is in sounds, which are so high-pitched only other animals can hear them.

The problem is that this truth isn’t satisfactory for us humans, because it’s almost too much.

This conception of God is so gigantic that it sort of feels like nothing.

I mean, if God is in everything, then isn’t that really similar to God being in nothing?

So, since this vastness of God can be overwhelming, we try to make up what God looks like.

We try to come up with visual depictions, descriptions and explanations of God.

We hear about what God looks like in poetry, we see what God looks like in movies and in paintings.

When we pray to God, we want an image of what we are praying to.

Humans have been trying to portray what God looks like for millennia.

Some religions think it's idolatrous to try to depict God, and so images of God are forbidden in Islam and in Judaism.

Christianity doesn't ban the visual depiction of God, which is why we see God illustrated in all kinds of ways in visual art.

But there's a problem with the ways in which we explain, describe and depict what God looks like.

The problem is that we have a tendency to create God in our image.

In fact, researchers at the University of North Carolina recently conducted a study in which they asked 511 Christians in the United States to compare 100's of faces and choose those, which looked the most like God.

The conclusion, people thought that God looks like they do.

“Older people saw an older God.

Attractive people saw a more attractive God.

African-Americans saw God as slightly more African-American.

One exception: Both men and women perceived God as equally masculine.

The results largely align with egocentric bias, our ability to overestimate how much others — God included — are just like us, authors said.

And that's important, they argued, because how we think God looks affects how we think God thinks.”

(Hafner, Josh. “What Does God Look Like? Depends on your politics and race, study finds,” www.usatoday.com).

Now, you might think that the ways we imagine God are harmless.

However, the study's authors concluded that the different ways we see God are manifested in religious conflicts.

These conflicts are driven by believers assuming that God's characteristics are universal, meaning the way they imagine God is the way all people imagine God.

You can see how we run into trouble when people conceive of God differently but we all assume that everyone else conceives of God the way we do, and that's when conflicts arise.

So the problem is that when we see God in our own image, we think God is like us, and therefore we privilege ourselves and people like us over other people, people of other genders, colors and ethnicities because we have literally deified ourselves.

You might object to this, and you're right, we probably don't do it consciously but we do it subconsciously.

You see enough movies, paintings and drawings, which depict God as an older, white man, well guess what?

Somewhere under our many layers of consciousness we are going to think that old, white men are more Godlike than other people, and this connection we've made between white men and God will work its way into our actions, even if only in tiny, subtle ways.

Maybe it means we think an older, white man is more pastoral.

The gender bias in hiring of clergy by congregations is a testament to this.

Maybe we think that our doctor should be an older, white man, because we subconsciously think he's more competent, he will be more capable of playing God when we're on the operating table.

Remember, it's all very subtle, subliminal, but the biases are there.

And, none of this conversation has even included animals and plants.

We immediately privilege all people over those other life forms, even though we technically know that God is in *everything*, those things included.

And there isn't more of God in us humans than in other living beings, but we act like there is.

So what do we do with the fact that God is in everything, which is too big to comprehend, and the fact that we anthropomorphize God, which can be dangerous?

My answer: try to resist the temptation to put a face on God.

The way I describe God is not through what God looks like, but how God makes me feel.

God looks like whatever emotionally moves me.

If I am happy, celebratory, grateful, sad, grieving, or lamenting, God looks like whatever caused me to feel that way.

I connect most deeply with God when I am emotionally moved, that's how I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God is with me in any given time or place.

Sometimes we're moved by experiences that are collective, like watching a sad movie with a group of people in a theater, or listening to a moving orchestra piece at symphony hall, or reading an article which touches you deeply, or going on a hike and feeling so deeply connected to nature and the great beyond, that you're moved to tears.

But I think it's often the case in which we feel the presence of God through deeply moving experiences, one-on-one with other people.

We're so busy and hyper-connected and over-stimulated we often don't hold space for each other.

So maybe you felt the presence of God the last time you were heard, I mean really heard.

I mean someone held space for you to just be you and they were completely present with you in your joy or sorrow or whatever you were feeling.

Or maybe you felt the presence of God because we are all so busy that we forget to do kind things for one another, and maybe someone who loves you did something incredibly thoughtful for you, and you saw the face of God in that person.

I can't draw a picture of God, but I can describe the way I've felt, the way the other person looked, I can describe the surroundings of the encounters I've had in which I knew that God showed up.

Each of us can act in such a way that people see God through us.

Take time to connect with others, make them laugh, if that's a gift of yours, show them they're loved, be vulnerable, give them the space to be vulnerable with you.

For some of us, being vulnerable isn't easy and it sounds scary, but I challenge you to have the courage to seek out those moments anyways.

Because the more moments we have for deep encounters with each other and with the world around us, the more we see God.

Once again, since this question was asked by a child, I will leave you with a story about another child:

Several years ago, a young girl named Tiger Curran, wrote a letter to God around Christmastime.

“In the letter she wrote, “Dear God, I would like to know what you look like.

I put a piece of paper in the envelope.

Will you draw a picture of yourself? Please write back.

Your friend, Tiger.”

Tiger put the letter into a stamped envelope addressed to God... and put it in the US mail.

Somehow the letter ended up in a post office in Fargo, North Dakota.

The postmaster forwarded the letter to the Rev. Dwight Meier, the United Methodist minister in town.

Rev. Meier wrote this letter back to the inquisitive girl.

*“Dear Tiger, thanks for your letter.
God turned your letter over to me to answer.*

It was a nice letter you wrote.

You asked what God looks like.

One reason God does not have a picture is that God looks like all the people that God has made.

Sometimes God looks brown, sometimes white, and sometimes black. In fact, God looks like the color of every person God has ever made.

Sometimes God looks like a girl and sometimes like a boy.

Look into the face of a person, and if you see love and kindness in that person, that is what God looks like.

When you are kind, helpful, and loving, look in a mirror and see what God looks like.” (Rev. Genzel, Cal. “What Does God Look Like?” <http://www.oldsouth.org/sermon/2014-08-17.>)

Maya Angelou once said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

I invite you to seek out opportunities to connect with people, so that, through your actions, through your words, through the way you make people feel, they will be able to see what God looks like. Amen.