

Wholly Other
Exodus 16:2-15
September 21, 2008

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit ...

Does God have a face? Does God have hands? If you reach out your hand, can you touch him? If you listen very carefully, can you hear him? If you look hard enough and long enough and high enough, can you see him? Is it even accurate to call God "him"?

Sometimes religious people are accused of creating their gods in their own image, of imagining gods who think like them, act like them, are like them. And sometimes religious people do! But this God, the God about whom our church says, "We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit," is not like us. This God is entirely different, wholly other.

Wholly other ...

Now those are words a theologian would use, not a believer. And I told you last week that what I liked about the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ is that it is not theological and analytical, aloof and passive, but personal and involved, active and passionate. "Wholly other" is not very personal! But it is a fair description, an accurate interpretation, of what is probably the most explicitly theological or philosophical phrase in the Statement of Faith: "We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit."

When we say we believe in the God who is Eternal Spirit, we are saying we believe in a God who is not what we are. God is eternal ... we are not. We are born and we die. There is time and history, lots of time and lots of history, before you existed and, almost certainly, there will be lots of time and lots of history after you cease to be.

God is spirit ... we are not. We are dust! We are made of "stuff" -- oxygen and carbon and hydrogen and nitrogen and calcium and phosphorous and a host of other elements. We like to think of ourselves as spiritual beings, and we may indeed have something of the spirit of God breathed into us, animating us and inspiring us, but all we are and all we do is vitally and inextricably connected to our bodies.

We are our bodies! We are exactly like the Israelites. There they are in the desert, a free people, a saved people, people rescued wondrously, miraculously, from slavery against all odds, and all they can think about is their growling stomachs!

We wish that the Lord had killed us in Egypt ... There we could at least sit down and eat meat and as much other food as we wanted.

Is their complaint legitimate? Of course it is! They do need to eat. They have to take care of their bodies. They are matter. They are dust. They are not spirit and they cannot live on freedom!

They are not spirit. We are not spirit. But God is spirit.

What is spirit? Spirit is like the wind: you cannot see it, but you recognize its presence by its effects. And yet, spirit is different from wind, too, because wind itself is an effect, the end result of variations in atmospheric pressure, while spirit is not an effect of something else, but the source of effects, something that exists in itself and as itself.

Spirit is something ... something we struggle to describe and to understand, but something, someone. Spirit is. Spirit is alive. Spirit is life, not just an idea, something imagined or supposed. When we say God is spirit, we mean that God has being, though not substance, that God is a person, though without a face, that God acts, though not with hands and feet. I can't tell you how that is or how that works. It is simply the way God's people have come to experience God.

Now that's an important point! Our theology, our belief, about God comes from our experience of God, not the other way around. Israel didn't think about God, wonder about God, go looking for God. God broke into their history, unexpectedly and dramatically, bringing them out of slavery and calling them to be witnesses to God's justice and mercy and love.

They encountered a God who saved them and led them and provided for them. They couldn't see God, but they saw the effects of what God did for them. Their reflection about God, their need to think about who God is and what God is like came later, much later. They didn't know much about God, but they knew God, knew that real presence that was utterly outside them, utterly beyond them, utterly different from them, and yet, somehow, very much with them.

They knew God as something, someone, wholly different, wholly other. They knew God as spirit and they worshipped God as spirit: trembling in God's presence, throwing themselves on the ground or falling to their knees in God's presence, humbling themselves in God's presence, singing songs of praise and wonder and thanksgiving in God's presence. Something is lost, in my opinion, something is wrong, with worship that treats God like a pal, a buddy, someone we seem to know everything about, someone with whom we seem to feel entirely at ease. God is other, wholly other. God is spirit!

God is spirit, eternal spirit. Does eternal mean lots and lots and lots of time, or does eternal mean something outside the boundaries of time altogether? That's a matter for philosophical debate, but we need to be careful here, because talking about an "eternal" God can all too easily become talking about a philosophical concept, something immutable and static and impersonal, a God of the philosophers and scholars, not the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob!

To the believer, eternal is not so much an idea, but an observation. Generation after generation after generation, we experience the effects of the God among us, the God who was already there before we were there, the God who was already there ... before anything was there. Before everything, before every thing, God is.

God is. God doesn't come and go, appear and disappear, come to be or cease to be. God simply is. In all times and in all places, we encounter the God who simply is. We are not always aware of God, but when we do become aware of God's presence, we realize that God has been there all along, already, and that God will be there. So it is as we reflect together on our experience of the faithfulness and constancy of God that we begin to talk about the God who is eternal, Eternal Spirit.

You know, something has to be eternal! Something cannot come out of nothing, so if this world, this universe, ourselves, do actually exist, something has to be eternal. Either spirit or matter are eternal. There are no other options. Either God is eternal and the universe was born of spirit, or matter itself is eternal and the universe gave birth to itself. Which is harder to imagine? Which is harder to believe? That God was always there? Or that matter was always there?

These are the burning questions. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why does this universe exist at all? And since it does exist, what was there at the beginning, before the beginning? What is?

We say, "God is."

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit ...

God is. Outside us, before us, beyond us, beyond our comprehension, beyond our imagination, beyond our ability to see or hear or touch or know, wholly other, God is.

God is spirit and we are body. God is eternal and we are like the grass, here today and gone tomorrow. There is a divide between God and us, a great divide of incalculable depth and incalculable breadth, incalculable because it is not measured by time or distance, but by essence. We and God are essentially different, utterly different is essence, and there can be no relationship between us and God unless that divide is bridged. And we cannot bridge it. We cannot find God.

But this is the gospel! This is the story, the whole story, the substance of our faith: God finds us! God bridges the divide: "The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth!"

"What is it?," the Israelites asked each other. "It is the food that the Lord has given you to eat!," Moses answered.

"The Lord knows what we are made of. The Lord remembers that we are dust!" The Lord knows what we need. The Lord provides all we need. The God who is, is with us!