

Mark 9:30-37

Back in the mid-1990's a singer named Joan Osborne released a song called "One of Us." The refrain went something like this: "What if God was one of us, Just a slob like one of us, Just a stranger on the bus, Trying to make his way home?"

The song was quite popular in its day, and it even became the theme song of an excellent but short-lived TV series called "Joan of Arcadia," a series about a high school girl – Joan – who meets God in unexpected places and in unexpected guises about town. Sometimes God is the janitor at school, sometimes the woman behind the counter at the convenience store, sometimes just a person on the street. In each episode, God in one of these personas gives Joan an assignment. Sometimes the assignment makes no sense, like to get a part-time job at the bookstore, or try out for the school play. But in each episode we see that one small thing leads to another and Joan is part of the solution to someone's problem.

I'm reminded of the song and the TV show because they have something in common with today's reading from the gospel of Mark. The song asks us to think of God in different terms: God as one of us, just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on the bus. The TV show portrays God as some ordinary person, sometimes dirty and ragged, sometimes an imposing African-American woman, sometimes a handsome young quarterback on the high school team. Such treatment of God can be unsettling, or even off-putting. Some of us may be offended by this casual and disrespectful treatment of God. We church-going Christians know about God, and we might not understand why someone would want to depict God as an ordinary being, one subject to human limits.

*"... for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying, and were afraid to ask him."* The Gospel of Mark, chapter 9: verses 31 and 32.

Just last Sunday, the reading from Mark was when Jesus was asking his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" and even more telling, "Who do you say I am?" The disciples all agreed that Jesus is the Messiah, the One we have been waiting for. The One foretold in the scriptures.

The disciples know very well the Messiah story. It's as old as their culture. The Messiah – the chosen one, the one who has been foretold by the prophets – arrives among us and is proven to us by many miraculous signs: he can heal the sick, feed multitudes, walk on water, calm the stormy skies. The Gospels are full of such signs, proving that Jesus is the One we've been waiting for. The Messiah tradition holds that the Chosen One is given this power by the Almighty so that he may lead his people to triumph over their enemies and oppressors, kick out the invaders, and restore their culture to glory and riches. There will be real pots of gold in real palaces of marble and sandalwood. They will have plenty of food even when famine is everywhere else. Great kings from other countries will come to pay their respects. This is what the new kingdom of God will be like. Everybody knows that.

But Jesus was requiring his disciples to think of the Messiah in a different way, as a somewhat ordinary man subject to human limits. No wonder they didn't understand. No wonder they were afraid to ask him. How can you say to God that God is not acting as God should, in your humble opinion? How can we say that God should not be a stranger on a bus? Or a lady behind the counter at a convenience store? If that's what God wants to be, then who are we to argue?

But we have this terrible struggle, don't we, between what we have come to know, and what we are being expected to understand. Our culture has had centuries to put together what we know. We have even amassed gigantic libraries of books of theology. Theology: the study of God. This is what we know.

But notice that Mark says the disciples did not understand. And neither do we. Knowing and understanding are two different things. We do not understand how innocent people can be murdered in random acts of violence. We do not understand how a merciful God can let a child die of disease or neglect. We do not understand why bad things can happen to good people. And if we question these things, we sort of imply that we know better, don't we? We imply that if God were doing what we think God should be doing, these sorts of things wouldn't happen. And when we imply that, we say something about the depth of our faith, don't we? We are supposed to be so faithful that we can say, "not my will but thine, O Lord." In the back of our minds, we might wonder how something awful can be the will of God. Is everything that happens the will of God? If not, why not? No wonder the disciples were afraid to ask. No wonder we are afraid to ask.

The Joan Osborne song goes on to say, "If you were faced with Him in all his glory What would you ask if you had just one question?" I might add my own post script to that and say, "if we heard the answer, would we understand it?"

An atheist may say to us: "I don't believe in God because there is no proof that God exists." Of course not. What a pitiful god it would be if we had only proof to rely on. Proof belongs to the realm of human knowledge.

One does not come to believe in God because of one's knowledge of God. One comes to believe in God because one begins to understand about God. God is about understanding. And understanding comes through faith. You cannot explain faith. You must feel it. Faith is our life-long struggle to understand. Experience and knowledge can take us only so far. The disciples are at the edge of their own world, and Jesus wants them to have enough faith to step into his world. When we reach that point when uncertainty opens at our feet, the only thing that can guide us is the gift of faith. Faith is the opposite of despair.

It's no coincidence that this teaching moment in the gospel of Mark ends with Jesus taking up a child and telling us that to welcome such a child is to welcome not

only Jesus himself but also the one who sent him. Children are the most natural people there are. They enjoy life and are ready to be amused by the world. Some studies say that a four-year old child may laugh up to 200 times in a single day. Mom and Dad, on the other hand, probably laugh fewer than 10 times a day. It would seem that the older you get and the more you know, the less you have to laugh about. Children are not hampered by what they know. They seem able to understand and delight in the world without having to know all the little details.

We are called as Christians to try to understand the world. We may know that certain diseases cause pain and disability, but we may not understand until we have sat watch all night at a bedside. We may know that certain non-profit organizations in our community are doing what they can to help the less fortunate, but it is when we have seen the faces of the helpers and those being helped, that we begin to understand what our community of faith and mercy could be like.

Knowing and understanding. This is what Jesus was hammering away at the disciples. They knew everything about the Messiah, but they understood very little about Jesus.

Is it possible for intelligent, educated, fully aware 21st-century people of intellect to be also people of faith at the same time? Of course. There is no contradiction.

My knowledge informs me of the distance of the Earth from the sun, the orbit of the Earth about the sun at this time of year, the weather patterns moving from the southern Pacific into the Bay Area, perhaps meeting colder air masses moving down from Canada. I can read about world trade and the futures market on Wall Street. I know about photosynthesis and rainfall and geology and perhaps the history of native peoples and early settlers who have shaped and transformed this land. I know something about cloud formations and the migratory patterns of waterfowl.

But when I wake up early on a still and crisp Saturday morning in the month of September, and walk out upon my deck with a steaming cup of coffee in my hand, and

am greeted by the calls of dozens of geese as they fly their V formations across the orange and purple sky above, with the blazing red maple trees beneath them, my knowledge and book-learning have little to do with this experience. I am absorbed by the emotion and the feel of this moment, and I am supremely joyful and thankful for being so blessed with the gift of this new day. Thus I understand the blessing of being who I am in this perfect place at this perfect moment.

The one thing is knowing. The other thing is understanding. We may know the world around us. That is humankind and our great big brains. But when we come to understand the world around us, that is the spirit and the hand of God. To know is an advantage of our highly technical world, and good for us. But to understand in the way that Jesus would have us understand? Well, that's a blessing. And may God bless us all.

Amen.