

Message: "Photoshopping God"

Scripture: I John 4:7-21

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

It has come to my attention that our church is way overdue.....for a new directory. You know, those magazine-type booklets that have pictures of the members and friends and families and functions of our church; the last one we produced was way back in 2017 when things looked a little different; some of the faces are now gone, but we have several who are new, and some of us have moved to a different location, and our building is newly renovated now, and.....well, lets face it, we each look a little bit different than we did seven years ago, agreed? It would be good to have an accurate, updated directory.

But how about an improved directory? Improved by addressing that last quality I mentioned, that we might look a little different from what we once looked like? Do you look different than you did seven years ago? I've been hearing a lot about this thing called Photoshop, and now I hear a lot about AI, or Artificial Intelligence, and how the two might be combined to work on visuals that are new and improved. Well, I thought I'd take a stab at using Photoshop and AI principles to see what my new and improved directory photos might look like - here's what I came up with: (powerpoints)

Now, here's my problem - which one do I choose? Which one shows me in my best light? Which one shows my truer self, you know, the beautiful, handsome, strong, graceful, smart, talented, well-balanced individual that I know you all can perceive under my rough exterior? Which best represents the real me?

Except, no such individual exists, does he?

Photoshop and AI are scary things because they have the power to deal in profound misrepresentation of the real world. They have the power to alter the perception of what is real - and this should scare the bejesus out of us (Websters says that the word "bejesus" is an intensifier, not a swear word necessarily). We've all heard of identity theft, marketeering scams, and internet impersonation schemes, all designed to take advantage of innocent people who may let their guard down - such technologies will likely exponentially increase the effectiveness of such deceptions. And the easier it is to misrepresent something or someone, the more reality gets horribly maligned.

This is especially the case with the misrepresentation of God, which is happening more and more these days. There are so very many forces at work claiming God's will and desire which coincidentally affirms their economic practices or their political aspirations or their exclusivistic worldview.....so many who claim God looks like what they are about, that God is with them and their side, that God wants what they want for the world; but the last thing these forces do is consider what the Bible actually says about it all, and what Jesus clearly emphasized which is often diametrically opposed to their thinking.

Think of it as the attempt to photoshop God into something more like what we'd want God to be. Or using AI to put a more convenient, comfortable veneer upon Jesus, one that promotes our will before anything else. Of course, both of these attempts to see God see anything but God; they are exercises in self-interest having little if anything to do with the divine.

But then, a natural question arises, one prompted by our scripture passage in 1 John - namely, what does God look like? Did you notice that this passage mentions one word 28 times, and no, it is not the word "the" or "and" - it is, of course, the word love. God is love, it says in multiple ways, and we know God when we love as God loves, and we don't know God if we don't love as God loves; as it says in verse 16 "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

So God looks like love - but we have so very many different types of love - I love chocolate, so does God look like a Hershey bar? I love motorcycles, so does

God look like a Kawasaki? Many of us love the Griz, so does God look like a football team? Am I being silly here? Yes, but serious too, for what I'm really playing at is a deeper, more important question that is at the heart of an authentically-lived faith, namely what does the love that is God look like?

I found a very helpful thought along these lines from Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who directs the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In this thought he is addressing how we read and interpret any scriptural passage in the Bible; he says, in regard to any text, "If you see God operating at a lesser level than the best person you know, then the text is not authentic revelation." If God is love (1 John 4:16), then no person could be more loving than God, Rohr says. "God is never less loving than the most loving person you know."

Wow! That helps me; I hope it helps you. Think of the most loving person you have ever known in your life - mother, father, sister, brother, sibling; grandfather, grandmother, aunt, uncle, cousin; neighbor, friend, co-worker; perhaps a figure in history, a worker for justice, someone who showed uncommon compassion or sacrificial kindness; a person of faith or an atheist or an agnostic; a soul who seemed to be so full of love that anytime you were in their presence you sensed a radiance that has nothing to do with light, a warmth that had nothing to do with temperature. Think of the most loving person you have ever known, or know now - if any text in the Bible speaks to you of a God who is less loving than that person you think of, read the text again; it has much more to say that we need to consider.

But we can go farther than that - farther than seeing God as more loving than the most loving person we can think of. For we know that God looks like Jesus - but we're not talking about the color of his hair, the tone of his skin, nor the shade of his eyes (and he probably did not look like most of the pictures of Jesus - blond hair, blue eyes, white skinned - and made complete with a British accent!). God looks like how Jesus loved; let me say that again - God looks like how Jesus loved. We are removing a degree of personification here, intentionally, not making God into a photo of a person, but letting what matters about being a person shape our understanding of God. This is what Jesus does for us - that Jesus was God is a mystery in itself, but the least important thing about Jesus

was how he looked physically; it is how he lived and what he taught that reveals what God looked like then - and what God looks like now.

If you want to see God, look for love, unconditional love, sacrificial love, committed love, helping love, listening love, forgiving love; if you want to see Jesus, look for examples of the kind of love he lived in his life on earth; you'll see no blond-haired, blue-eyed man, but you'll be watching God in real time. And if you want to help others see God, love in the ways God loved through Jesus. Remember: God looks like how Jesus loved; and God can look like how we love, if our love follows Jesus.