

**The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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**The Search for a Meaningful Life  
*What Does God Have To Do With It?*  
Matthew 16: 13-20  
Romans 12: 1-8**

In the 1930's, two women, influenced by the Swiss-born psychiatrist Carl Jung's intriguing suggestions that human behavior was not random but was in fact predictable and classifiable, became very interested in classifying people's observable behavior and the differences in how all varieties of people approached life.

These two women, neither of them psychologists, were Katherine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Myers Briggs. Throughout the 1930's they observed and developed better ways to measure these differences. Spurred by the onslaught of WW II and the observation that many people in the war effort were working in tasks unsuited to their abilities, the two women set out to explain, in scientifically rigorous and reliable terms, differences according to Carl Jung's theory of personality preferences. Thus was born the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, first published in 1962, which has become the most widely used personality indicator known in academic, corporate, counseling, even religious and other settings. It undeniably has been noted as a landmark-accomplishment of this mother-daughter team.

Now I am willing to speculate that if I asked for a show of hands this morning and inquired as to how many of you have taken the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, there would be plenty who would affirmatively respond. As for me, I've taken it at least 3 times in the span of my 4-decade and then some life.

Earlier this summer, I was given a Dilbert cartoon: (the character who apparently represents the techno-corporate world)

*From now on, all teams will be formed on the basis of Myers-Briggs Personality Types. If you do not have a personality, one will be assigned to you by Human Resources.*

You may be wondering at this point what in the world any of this has to do with my second sermon in a series addressing *The Search for a Meaningful Life*, and more specifically, what God has to do with it. Nevertheless, I do think it would be a fascinating conversation to consider what we think God's Myers-Briggs type might be. INTJ, ESFJ, ENFP, INTP? Regardless, both from observation and personal experience, I would say that the Myers-Briggs has much to contribute to *The Search for a Meaningful Life*. But that's for another discussion over coffee sometime.

All of which has resulted in the evolution of my thinking during the week about this: **identity**. Not only how we identify ourselves, our personality type, who we think we are;

but also how we think about God, or how we identify God in terms of who and what. Upon consulting my trusted *Webster's* it had this to say about **identity**: the condition of being oneself and not another; condition or character as to who a person or thing is; the sense of self, providing continuity in personality over time. Here's what it said about **God**: the creator and ruler of the universe; Supreme Being; (in some cases Supreme Being is considered with reference to the sum of God's attributes.) We might also conclude that indeed God (or God's identity) is and does provide continuity in personality over time. It's a bit hard to argue with that one.

And upon closer examination, the Scripture readings today have an identity theme:

Karen read from the Letter to the Romans, where the inscrutable and controversial writer known as Paul admonishes: "not to think more highly of yourselves than you ought to think." Paul has been described by some scholars "as having possessed an enormous ego, a huge sense of who he was and of what was expected of him, and certainly what he expected of others; and in his letters he is often concerned with the question of identity. Who are we? Whose are we? How do we know in the world who we are?"

As much as I struggle at times theologically with Paul's writings, I happen to think that this particular chapter (12) in Romans is in fact one of his greatest contributions to the canons of Holy Scripture. That is, to remind us of the importance of humility and to know that we are in fact, not only our identity. Despite what our Myers-Briggs may tell us, do we really believe that we are ultimately in charge of or have control over our own destiny and that of the universe? More importantly, Paul perhaps is inferring that we also ought to remember an inheritance we bear every day, which is partly alluded to in our reading from the gospel of Matthew today, and that which is also contained in the wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is here we are reminded that we are made in the image of God, for the creation narrative in the Book of Genesis illuminates for us that our ancestors Adam and Eve were the first to discover that unfortunately knowledge and arrogance are related. It tells us that they thought they could become as gods. And in the gospel of Matthew today, the followers of Jesus are directly asked: "But who do you say that I am?" It is in these holy texts that they (and we) are reminded to consider not only who God is, but also who we are, whose we are, and how in the world we know who we are?

While some may harbor cynicism or skepticism about such tools as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, I was reminded this week that its success has been characterized by this: the importance of people and community. The positive, person oriented nature of type watching that is used in a number of settings comes down to the reality of harnessing and valuing the affect of human capital, as well as embracing difference. That is, recognizing the importance of relationship not only to others, but to self as well.

However, whomever and whatever you may think about God, the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are clear in the fundamental basis of our identity as human beings in our relationship to God: we are made in the image of God, and everything that we believe or do that is done to us must be understood in the light of that affirmation. We are made in

the image of God, which means there is that of God in each and every one of us, that each one of us bears God's mark and image. It also means that there is that of every one of us in God. There are some radical implications for all of this. Yes if you look in the mirror you see a partial image of God. But then if you look around you see the totality of what God had in mind in the first place. Writes one theologian: "Any person who rejects another person in fact rejects a part of God, and likewise rejects an image of God found in another human being, and even in nature. Our identity stems not from what we do, or what we have, but from that and from whom we come. Our identity is not ourselves; our identity derives from the beginning of all that is God. We are related to all that God has presumably begun and while there are people we do not know, there are no strangers; while there are people who live in other places, there are no exiles. There is no one beneath contempt, no one beyond concern." Recall what I alluded to last week in my sermon (asking you to return this week) on Faith and Reason when I said that *true faith is not the blind faith of ignorance, but a direct connection to God's essence, which is neither arbitrary nor conditional.*

While we demonize and dehumanize others in order not to have to accept them as creatures of God, we learn our unfortunate lessons only when we recognize in the diversity of human experience the presence and the image of that very same God. God is not just kind and nice to people other than us; God consists of people other than us. God is as exiled as the exile, as different as the most different person. This is where the doctrine or the essence of God and the doctrine or the essence of human identity come together.

Now, lest you feel I am meandering into this simplistic naïve notion and explanation of God and the search for a meaningful life, I know and you know there are some terrible things happening every day in our world. You're thinking (and so am I) what earthly difference does God make to those who are undergoing horrendous events? Undergoing them at the hands of other humans, who like them, supposedly are the image of God? (Perhaps you've seen this image or are aware of it: a little boy in a yarmulke, tears streaming down his cheek as he pushes with all his might against the massive chest of an Israeli soldier. Other soldiers strive with other settlers, their faces show the misery of their position: We are arrayed against our own. We are forcing our own people out of their homes) If God is simply the fellow sufferer who understands and finds no one beyond concern than what is going on? And what about all those with cancer, AIDS, and the host of disease that so many are up against? Aren't we fully justified in saying to God: We appreciate your concern, but couldn't you help change things? There, I've done it again, now you must return next Sunday for the final sermon in this series: "*The Light at the End of the Tunnel: Redemption.*" so we may think together about these difficult times, realities and circumstances.

It is indeed quite difficult, for once we consider that we behold the image of God, we come to the opposite and rational conclusion that no one else could possibly do the same. Identity and ego force us to become exclusive of other people. One of my favorite preachers put it this way: "Whatever we are, we have no common bond with those who do not share our race, our class, *our religious tradition*, our ethnicity or language or

sexuality or anything else that distinguishes, types, marks us and makes us so terribly interesting.” (italics mine)

Relationship and identity I’ve learned go hand in hand. There is nothing solitary about our identity. Though spoken from a Christian context I urge you to read the entire chapter of Romans 12, and you’ll see that the whole of it in context is collective, cooperative, all the various parts of the body of God united in their well-being of the whole. Our image in God is one of unity in purpose, a difference in function, but an ultimate re-creation of the unity of our likeness in the image of God. How does that too, speak to the vastness of religious difference and identity in our country and the world? Such a critical question here and now in the year 2005.

I commend to you alongside the letter of Romans, (and the Hebrew Scriptures) the fine work of Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion and Indian studies at Harvard University and Director of the Pluralism Project. As a Christian, Dr. Eck knows that the issues of religious difference have been front-page news and people of all traditions have exhibited the wares of religious chauvinism and violence, using religious identities and language to stake out political territory. In her book, *Encountering God*, she urges us “to consider the theological questions of how we as Christians or Jews or Muslims will think about our own faith anew in relation to the faith and practice of our neighbors.” “How will we understand ourselves as people of faith in a world in which it is simply impossible to deny the vibrancy of communities of faith different than our own?” This is the remarkably critical and important awareness too of the meaning of relationship and identity as hand in hand. More now than ever, there is nothing solitary about our religious identity and we forget that at our peril.

This is what I’ve been thinking about throughout the week. Not only have I had my own life and experience to learn from, but I also have the remarkable aid and mentoring through the years of such fine scholars and theologians like Sallie McFague, Diana Eck, Joan Chittester, Karen Armstrong, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Peter Gomes, Walter Bruggemann, Paul Tillich and many others. But do you know what else? While I’ve had such great spiritual minds, writings and virtual mentors to learn from, I do not have the benefit of relationship with them. What I also know is that I’ve had remarkable, God-image bearing people in my life who at some of the most difficult, painful and doubt-filled times have been there to put their arms around me and say: Don’t ever forget that you are beloved of God, made in that image now and forevermore. I/we love you, but God loves, embraces and celebrates you more than you can ever imagine. That has transformed my life.

This is not about self-esteem. Though it is important to possess that, it does not end there; that we should think well of ourselves in order to protect ourselves from difficulty and criticism. We must think and know well of ourselves (however we determine that uniqueness, Myers-Briggs or otherwise) because we reflect the goodness of God, and that imposes a burden, not a liberty. It has been said that we treat others well not because we are good but because they too are the image of God, even as we are. God doesn’t expect

it but requires it. Would we not consider this to be a truly transforming part of the search for a meaningful life?

*We call out your name in as many ways as we can.*

*We fix your role towards us in the ways we need.*

*We approach you from the particular angle of our life.*

*We do all that, not because you need to be identified, but because of our deep need, our deep wound, our deep hope.*

*We stammer about your identity, only to learn that it is our own unsettling before you that wants naming.*

*We are – by your freedom and your hiddenness – made sure yet again that you are God.*

*Beyond us, for us, but beyond us, not at our beck and call, but always in your own way.*

*Beyond all our explaining and capturing and fixing you,*

*We give you praise,*

*We thank you for your presence in suffering love,*

*And for our names and identity that you give us. All of us.*

*Amen.*

*(Walter Bruggemann, adapted)*