

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 11/10/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

There's a parable from India that I first heard in grade school and many of you know it, too. It's about six blind men who encounter an elephant for the first time. Each describes the elephant based on the part of the elephant he touches. The first, who feels the side of the elephant, is sure that the elephant is very like (I was particularly struck by that phrase the first time I heard the story) a wall. The second man who felt the elephant's trunk concluded that the elephant was very like a snake. The third, holding the elephant's tusk, proclaimed that the elephant was very like a spear. The fourth after touching the ear said that the elephant was very like a fan. The fifth, upon holding the elephant's leg determined that the elephant was very like a tree trunk. And the sixth blind man, who encountered the elephant's tail, announced that elephant was very like a rope. Some versions of the parable include an ending where the six men share their different perspectives and, believing that the others are lying, are led to violent disagreement, and even come to blows.

The story is a great metaphor on several different levels for the Christian Church. Our different denominations have aspects of our theologies that we emphasize and debate with Christians of other traditions. At times in Christian history, Christians have even turned violent against each other over what they believe is the only truth that should be believed.

It's the same also when we read the Bible. Depending on which part of the Bible you read, your perspective of GOD can vary greatly. Roger Wayne Wolsey, the Director of the Wesley Foundation campus ministry at the University of Colorado in Boulder in his book, Kissing Fish, has listed various ways that one might understand GOD from reading the Bible. He shares the GOD might be seen as "a judge; a compassionate, assuring and forgiving leader; a jealous lover; a vindictive wrathful ruler; one who will present a messiah to rescue Israel from oppression, and raise it to its former glory; as an intimate, loving parent who was uniquely present in the life of Jesus; and, finally, as the One who will make all things new by destroying and displacing all the bogus, ungodly powers and rewarding the faithful at a future global judgement and reckoning day." I don't know how many of these you had on your list of descriptions of GOD, and you maybe could add other descriptions to the list.

It's important to remember as we read the Bible that the writers presented GOD, like the blind men, from their unique perspective. They were influenced by their time and situation and the message they felt needed to be shared. The Bible has been presented to us by those who read and proclaimed it in the past based on their context and, again, by the message they felt was needed to be proclaimed. And as we read it, we also do so through the filters of our situation and the world around us. Does that call into question the validity of the Bible or who GOD really is? Well, yes and no. It is vital that we recognize that there are many factors that influence our understanding of who GOD is. And we should acknowledge that we regularly limit who GOD is and what GOD desires for us and for all creation, based on what we want, need, and have been told. GOD certainly may be all those things that Roger Wayne Wolsey listed, or these may simply reflect the ways in which the writers experienced GOD, which, in a sense, also makes them true for GOD. In any case, the encouragement for us should be, first, to never give up trying to better understand who GOD is through our study of GOD'S word. And second, we should never deny another their understanding of GOD and allow our differences to become divisive. As much as we want to be "right" in our beliefs about GOD, we need to remember the truth that all elephants are really very like tree trunks. Right?

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey