

**“Risky Wisdom”**  
**Mark 8:27-37**  
**San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore**  
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In yesterday’s L.A. Times there appeared an article entitled: “Americans See One God, but in Different Ways.” It described a study done by Baylor University that named four different ways Americans see God. These were *authoritarian, benevolent, critical, and distant*.

*Authoritarian* was defined as “engaged in humans’ daily lives and judgmental.”

*Benevolent* was defined as “engaged but not judgmental.”

*Critical* was defined as “not engaged but judgmental.”

*Distant* was defined as “not engaged and not judgmental.”

About 31% of respondents believed in an *authoritarian* God; that is, they believed in a God as engaged in humans’ daily lives and a judgmental God. So nearly 1/3 of Americans who believe in God believe in an authoritarian God. About 23%, nearly 1/4 of Americans believe in a *benevolent* God, engaged but not judgmental. Some 16% believe in a *critical* God, a God who is not engaged but nevertheless is judgmental. And 24%, again nearly 1/4, believe in a *distant* God, a God who is not engaged with the world but who is also not judgmental.

My first reaction to this study was that none of these categories would be the way I see God, (but then, they didn’t ask me.) What this study says is extremely important to those of us in progressive Protestant churches and very relevant to today’s gospel text where Peter reveals the true identity of Jesus as those closest to him, see him.

Let’s think for a few moments about what the Bible says about the nature of God and then what this specific gospel text reveals. First, there are strands or references of these four categories (authoritarian, benevolent, critical, and distant) within scripture. But these strands are part of a whole that is not clearly defined by any one of these categories. Let’s take *authoritarian*, for example. Because God creates, God accepts responsibility out of love for that which is created. Like a parent who takes responsibility for a child and who loves that child tells the child what is good or bad, sometimes forces the point through a “time out” when the child misbehaves, and may even intervene and punish to make a point when there’s no other way, God assumes some authoritarian role as creator, but this is not the major characteristic of God.

When Allison and Brittany were little, I had some authority and I used it at times. But I don’t believe either girl would describe me as an authoritarian parent today. It is a small piece of a much larger relationship I’ve had over the years with my children. The authoritarian descriptions of God in the Bible are but a small piece of a much larger relationship God has had with God’s children throughout history. *Now why is it important not to limit our understanding of God to an authoritarian picture? It makes all the difference in the world!*

As parents we have authority over our children for a short time. Soon they are as big as we are, as strong or stronger than we are; and even though we can still exert authority by withholding money or something they want, that is not enough to always get them to do what we want them to do. Then, whatever influence we have is based on our relationship, a relationship based on love and trust that has developed over the years. God can tell us what is best for us. Sometimes we may obey like children; ultimately we obey because we trust that God loves us and we love God.

So why does this authoritarian God appeal to so many people? Some would say it's our evolutionary development that hard wires us to want to follow the pack, to have an alpha male take care of us. After all, it is nice to not have to make decisions all the time and to not have to think so hard. It's especially nice when the thinking involves hard issues with much at stake. But God created us with minds and, I believe, expects us to use them. We cannot avoid our responsibility. One of the reasons that some churches grow so fast and so big is because the preacher stands up and says so emphatically exactly what to believe that it makes the people feel good, and safe, and secure. You will not hear that from where I stand.

Any authority God has over our personal lives is either based out of a relationship of love or fear; and I choose love, as reflected in one of our favorite hymns: *And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.* If we choose to view God as authoritarian, it will shape the way we live and function in the world; because God is the measure to which we will hold our leaders and the concept of how we understand our world to function. **It does make a difference!**

The second category used to describe God is *benevolent*, engaged but not judgmental. Certainly this is in the Bible; yet it, too, is but one characteristic of God within a larger picture. Job would have been hard pressed to describe God as benevolent. When I'm with a family whose child is critically ill in the hospital; they don't necessarily feel God's benevolence at that moment. And the prophets spoke of a God who was engaged with the world but also had some harsh critique of what people were doing.

God loved Israel, but God allowed for what we would call "natural consequences" to occur when Israel broke covenant with God. God's benevolence is a given because God's love is a given, but it is a benevolence that doesn't mean bad things will never happen, or that we're shielded from the natural consequences of our actions.

The categories of *critical and distant* are simply not biblical in their saying God is not engaged in this world, because everything about the Bible is a witness otherwise. God is very much engaged in this world!

Now what does Peter's confession, "You are the Messiah", say about how we view God? If, as Christians, we find God revealed through Jesus -- if we like Peter, see Jesus as the anointed one of God -- then God is engaged intimately with this world, God holds authority based on love for creation, God is benevolent but also willing to faithfully speak truth to power.

If Jesus is our lens for seeing God most clearly, we see in Jesus the spirit of God that is authoritarian in truth telling, benevolent in service, critical in discernment of what's happening in the world, and not at all distant. Jesus is willing to come to dwell with us, sharing our common lot, and reconciling all to the Oneness that is the Creator's design. If they'd ask *me* for a category in which to place God, I would have said, "I believe in a relational God." If we choose to believe in a God whose overall characteristic is a deep longing to be in relationship with humankind, then we will choose also to devote our lives and our work to providing for healing, healthy, loving, reconciling, redeeming, peaceful relationships that grow out of a love we have because we've first been loved. And we will not continue to follow the pack just because we're afraid we might lose our lives. Jesus says those who live life wanting only to save their life will lose it, and those willing to lose their life for his sake will save it.

Last Monday night I was captivated by a show where children who'd lost parents on 9/11 were interviewed. I listened intently while one young girl shared her thoughts and emotions so purely and genuinely. When asked how she copes and how she's found healing, she said she finds ways to help others. To save her own life, she loses her life in service to others in need. The gospel is about a Messiah willing to lose himself for truth and love of others. The gospel is about losing ourselves in the service of God's beloved creation, a creation God loves without beginning and without end. May it be so!