



Wednesday, June 27, 2018  
6:30pm  
St. Mary's Episcopal Church



### This Finding Made the News -

A recent study conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (June 12, 2018) considered the question of how people see God. Test subjects were shown pairs of photos and asked to identify which image they thought most resembled the face of God.

Researchers found that of the 551 American Christians polled, perceptions of God reflected how they saw themselves and what kind of society they wanted to inhabit.

UNC psychology professor Kurt Gray said the study demonstrated that for the most part people identify with an image of God that looks like them, so whites imagine a white God, blacks a God with darker skin, young people a younger God, attractive people a more attractive God. But all people in the study tended to see God as masculine.

According to a synopsis of the study posted on UNC-Chapel Hill's website, "Conservatives are more motivated than liberals to live in a well-ordered society, one that would be best regulated by a powerful God. On the other hand, liberals are more motivated to live in a tolerant society, which would be better regulated by a loving God."

Study participants' preference of one or the other kind of society correlated with how they tended to view God. They chose an image of the kind of God they thought could deliver the kind of society they wanted. Those who wanted a more tolerant society saw God as "more feminine, younger, and more loving," while people who prioritized a well-ordered society saw God as more masculine, older, wealthier and authoritarian.

### Applying this news story

The way we see God has implications for the way we see ourselves, other people and our place in the universe. God is both transcendent and immanent -- beyond our comprehension and yet closer to us than the air we breathe. God is unknowable and yet self-revealing. God tells us, "My thoughts are higher than your thoughts and my ways are higher than your ways," yet John says that the Son of God, who was in the heart of the Father, has made God known to us. Since God created human beings in the image and likeness of God, if we want to reflect that image and likeness, it forces us to seek to know the God who invites us to discover the personality and nature of God.

#### Questions:

When you think about God or enter into prayer,  
what images of God come to your mind?

Have those images changed over time? If so, in what way?

Do you think the *kind of society you want to inhabit*

influences how you picture God? (see above brown box)

If so, how?

## What does the Bible say about “image”?

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ..." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:26-27

In its classic form, Judaism took the radical step of worshiping God without an image. Moses castigated Aaron for creating a golden calf upon which God might ride, as their neighbors' gods supposedly rode on beasts of burden. The ark of the covenant used in worship by the Israelites featured a throne on which no God could be seen. When Isaiah looked into God's throne room, he reportedly saw only the hem of God's garment, not God himself.

The Genesis text above gives us the impression that since God created humankind in God's image, we can get some idea of what God "looks" like by looking at humanity. But what does that mean, exactly?

Certainly it means something other than the idea that God and human beings are physically alike. The Hebrew words for image (*tselem*) and likeness (*d'muth*) in this text apply to something other than bodily form. They refer to an outline or representation, facsimile, replica, mirror image or shadow of an original, a sharing of certain intellectual and moral attributes of God with human beings.

### Questions:

What qualities or traits can you identify as belonging only to God?

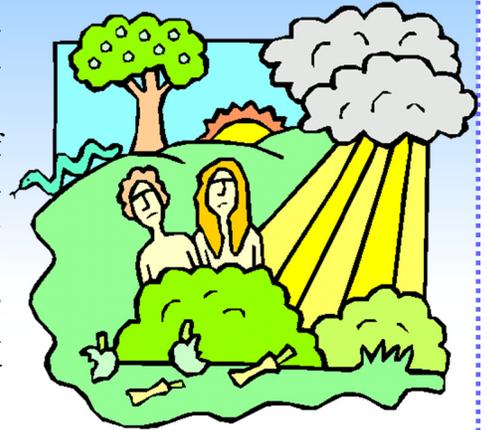
What attributes are specific to humans but not to God?

What intellectual and moral traits are common to God and humans?

Does the idea of the incarnation of God --

of God taking on human flesh --

appeal to you? Why or why not?



## How do we “imagine” ... the “image”?

This conTEXTS is based upon a study by the North Carolina University. If you want to read the full study, see [msprice@Charlotteobserver.com](mailto:msprice@Charlotteobserver.com). entitled “What does God look like? Liberals and Conservatives have different ideas, NC study finds.”

The study found demographics often came into play with our image of God: Caucasians tended to see a white God; African Americans imagined a black God; younger people saw a younger God and attractive people imagined a more attractive God.

A process called reverse correlation was used to create the final image, said the report. The 511 test subjects were shown hundreds of randomly varying pairs of faces and asked which of the two looked more like “the face of God.”

Psychology Professor Kurt Gray, the study's senior author, said the study revealed people tend to believe in a God that looks like them, except in one curious instance.

“Men and women believed in an equally masculine-looking God,” said the report.

From the study - We present a measure of God's face that captures how believers think about God's mind. In our sample of 511 American Christians, participants' political conservatism and egocentrism shaped how they visualized God, consistent with past literature on how motivation and cognition influence views of God.

Specifically, conservatives visualized a more powerful-looking God whereas liberals

visualized a God who looked more loving. Participants also visualized a God who looked like them in terms of age, attractiveness, and, to a lesser extent, race; they did not, however, show egocentrism in terms of God's gender.

These findings are striking in two respects.

First, though many Christians claim that God's appearance is unknowable, our sample of believers did appear to have stable representations of God's face that included differentiable physical features (e.g. masculinity, youthfulness, and Whiteness) and psychological characteristics (e.g. lovingness).

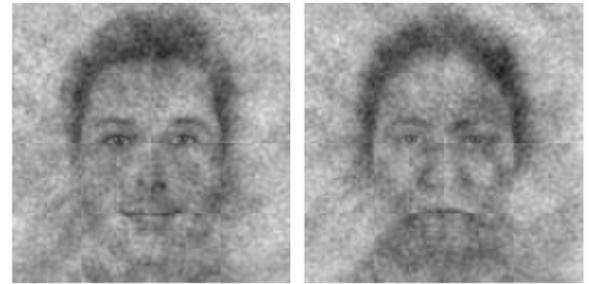
Second, even though American Christians ostensibly believe in the same God, people perceived Him in their own way, their perceptions reflecting their political ideologies and their own personal appearance."

**Questions:**

How do you think God is like or unlike the social groups to which you belong?

How do you think God is like or unlike those who belong to a social group with which you do not connect?

Take the information from the brown box, the green box, the blue box, this orange box and share your perspectives.



Composite of different "images" of God taken from the study

**Wednesday evenings in July**

- July 4 No conTEXTS meeting
- July 11 SWEEP group meets
- July 18 conTEXTS
- July 25 conTEXTS



conTEXTS will meet in the parish hall from 6:30-7:30pm. The topic for each week will be posted on the parish website on Friday and will appear in the Sunday bulletin.

*Thank you for your participation.*