

Know a man who bought a big, old house that had fallen into disrepair. He wanted to fix it up and live there. It was a huge house, its problems were extensive, and after a few months of work it became clear he had underestimated the complexity of the project and overestimated his ability to fix it. **Last week, when I said I would be answering the question “Who is God?” today, it seems I underestimated the complexity of the question and overestimated my ability to answer it.** Nevertheless, I am a tilter at windmills, a man with more enthusiasm than sense, so I forge ahead.

When I was about five years old, I began attending Sunday school, where I learned about a God I no longer believe in. This God wanted me to eat fish on Friday, confess my sins on Saturday, and worship him on Sunday. **This God was always a him, who lived in the sky, and spoke only to the Pope, who spoke to the cardinals, who spoke to the bishops, who spokes to the priests, who spoke to the nuns, who spoke to me.** This God wanted me to attend Catholic school, but my mother didn't, and she won that argument, which seemed to suggest my mother was more powerful than God, which is when I stopped believing in that God. My mother is a strong woman, but any God who can be bested by a determined Belgian might not be as powerful as we thought.

Then I became a Quaker and began to learn about a different God. Theoretically, of course, it was the same God. **But now I learned other aspects of his personality.** God was still a he. But he related to all Christians. Because I attended rather traditional meetings, I didn't hear them extol the contributions of other religions, but neither did I hear those religions disparaged, which was helpful. God was growing a bit bigger, relating to people who weren't just like me. I was taught other things about God.

I was taught God would answer my prayers if they were offered with faith. I really wanted to believe that, and I kept believing it long after there was little evidence to support it. Now I no longer believe God automatically grants the prayers of the faithful, and I've become very careful what I pray for.

I no longer pray for my team to win. I went to the Pacer's game this past Wednesday night. Not even God can help them.

I no longer pray for my country to win. Though I do pray we use our vast wealth and power for good.

I no longer pray for God to cure me or those I love. Had my heart broken too many times over that one. Though I do pray we will handle adversity well, and I thank God for smart doctors and caring, competent nurses.

I no longer believe my prayers can change God's mind. But I do believe they can change mine.

Some people say God never changes—the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. That’s true, and not true. **When we love, we are changed by the actions of our beloved.** So God might be more nimble and responsive than we were taught. Maybe God isn’t stone. Maybe God is flowing water. We talk about God being a rock, sing about Standing on the Rock and the Rock of Ages. **But if you visit the Grand Canyon, you realize water is more powerful than rock.** Does water change? Yes and no. It’s still two hydrogen atoms bonded to a single oxygen atom. Always has been; always will be. That’s its nature. **But do the circumstances of the physical universe alter the water’s path, alter how and where and with what intensity the water flows?** Of course.

Likewise, part of God is always the same. **God’s essential nature is unchanged.** God is love. God is always that in us which brings out the beautiful and the good. But God is adaptable. When the circumstances of our lives change, whether through randomness or our intentional choices, God works with that. God isn’t committed to a predetermined set of blueprints. God doesn’t storm off when the game changes. **Please don’t worry whether you’re following God’s One Great Plan for your life, that if you get it wrong your life will be ruined.** God’s goal is to bring out the beautiful and the good in us in whatever situation we find ourselves. You be concerned with whether you’re letting God bring out the beautiful and the good in you.

Next observation: The older I get, the bigger God's family gets, the more people God includes. **Did God change his mind about those people?** Of course not. That's another unchanging aspect of God's nature. Love embraces, love invites, love includes, love opens the door. God's mind about those people didn't change. My mind about them changed. **When I was a little kid, I thought God was just for my family.** Then my view broadened a bit, and I thought God, "Well, God isn't just for my family. God is for the church."

Then I broadened a bit more and believed God was uniquely for my nation, that God uniquely loved and blessed America more than other nations. Lot of people stop right there. But I tell you who changed my mind about that. Jay Leno. **It was 1987 and a toddler named Jessica McClure had fallen into a well in Midland, Texas.** Remember that? Stuck in an eight-inch pipe, twenty-two feet inside the earth for 59 hours before she was rescued. Very dramatic. Very frightening. But she was rescued and the first President Bush went out there the next day, looked down into the pipe, thanked the rescuers, which was well and good, then exclaimed, "Only in America!" **Jay Leno recounted the President's visit on his show that night and said, "Yeah, if that had happened in Sweden, they would have said, 'Ah, leave her down there.'"**

Jay Leno said that, and the light went on for me. I could no longer assume Americans were uniquely virtuous, that God loved us in a way God loved no other nation. **So the older I've gotten, the bigger God's family has grown.** Again, God didn't change her mind about others. God changed my mind. The water wore down the rocks of exclusivity. When I experienced that change in myself, I "got" the Old Testament. Here were people who initially thought God was only for their tribe, then only for their race, then only for their nation, then only for their religion, then finally all the world. **The Bible is the story of the dawning and unfolding of that realization.** The problem is that people read the Bible, run into a primitive understanding of God, and think it's conclusive and final. "Well, it says here, God loves this group but not that group," and they think God still plays favorites. **But you know it's God working in you when you start including more and more people in God's family.**

Last time I went into the hospital, I had to fill out all these forms, answer all these questions. They wanted to know my religion, I checked the Christian box. Then my denomination. They didn't have a Quaker box. Not enough of us. I had to write "Quaker" in the "other" space. You've probably had to fill out those forms, too. But now here's the thing: God doesn't look to see what box we checked.

I guess that's who God is to me. When I was little, I thought God looked to see if we'd checked the right box. Now I believe God doesn't do boxes.