

May 21, 2017
1 Peter 3:13-22
Acts 17:22-31

The Difficulty of Knowing God

During my middle school years, I lived in a little town in South Dakota of about 400 people. And in that little town there were three little churches and three distinct ways of knowing God. We Presbyterians knew God in our elected and electing Presbyterian way. The Catholics knew God in their ancient and liturgical Catholic way. The Missouri Synod Lutherans knew God in their exclusive-to-Missouri Synod Lutheran way. All three churches had their own way. And there was no way together. Each one believed the other was wrong about something. And I remember being worried about that and scared of the other churches in town; scared of even going past their buildings. Because I thought someone would jump out and tell me that God didn't like me. That their church was right and my church was wrong. And that I didn't know anything about God because I didn't know what I SHOULD know about God.

I worried about that as a kid. I worried about knowing God the right way. I wondered if I knew the right scriptures and the right beliefs about

who God is and what God does. And maybe you have wondered the same. You wonder if you know God the right way. If you have the right beliefs and if you are in the right church and if you are on the right team and the right side of God and you worry that God worries about that too. You worry because there is no shortage of people in the world who will tell you that you are wrong, no matter what you believe. Maybe you wonder where you fit in, in this whole religion thing. Because you believe in God and you know there is more than nothing out there. But you have noticed that there is more than one kind of way to know God. That there are many, many ways to have faith in this world. In this global inter-connected world, there are many, many ways to believe. And all of this variety, it's amazing and confusing and hard to navigate and know the way that is God's way. But that's what we do as the church. We choose to say that we know God in Jesus Christ. We say we know God in Jesus even though it's a difficult to do. It's one of the many difficult things we commit to doing, like sharing all of our possessions. And forgiving one another over and over again. Saying that we know God is also difficult in our diverse religious landscape.

Because we know enough about God to know that we don't know it all. That God can't be reduced to a few bullet points. That the Bible is a complicated book created by inspired but very human individuals; and it did not drop straight down from a heavenly printing press. The Bible itself is all about our human struggle to know God. With questions like: Who is God? And who are we? And what does God want us to do with our lives? And what does it mean to love my neighbor? And does God approve of slavery or not? And are women allowed to be leaders? And does God like our country more than others? And does God like me more than others? We have always had questions. We want to know if we are right about God. Because we are told that we should be. We should know. We ought to know.

I've been told that before, that I ought to know God. That I should know. That I just don't understand the right things. That I just don't read my Bible correctly. That I am on the wrong side and on the wrong team and in the wrong Church, and that I should know better. Maybe you have had that experience too. At church or at camp or at school or at work or out in the world somewhere; someone told you that you didn't know

God, not really. And what you thought you knew was is actually quite incorrect and quite terrible and quite dangerous to yourself and others. Since the beginning of religion, that has happened. There has been a right way and a wrong way to know God. And there have been trials and excommunications and burnings at the stake. And wars and conflicts and massacres all for the sake of the right way of God that everyone else must agree with. Rev. Carol Howard Merritt, a Presbyterian writer, describes growing up in a church that knew God with certainty. And knew scripture and knew that women didn't preach and that social justice was part of a communist plot. They knew God the right way, they believed and everyone else was wrong. But she knew there was something more gracious and life-giving about God. But she was afraid of getting it wrong and being wrong with God. While visiting family in Florida, she writes of swimming out into the ocean, past the waves; and floating on her back; and all of a sudden the fear she felt dissipated. She recalls: "I felt arms growing up around me, and I felt God surrounding

me and holding me and I had the innate understanding that I was born of God...that God would uphold me just as those waters upheld me.”¹

There is comfort for those of us who worry today. In our scriptures, we hear that we don't have to fear getting it wrong. In 1 Peter it says: “Who will harm you if you are eager to do good? Do not fear what they fear. Do not be intimidated. But in your heart, sanctify Jesus as Lord.” You have faith in Jesus. You have hope. You know in your heart that you are eager to do what is right. Do not fear. You are seeking God. And God is seeking you. Do not be intimidated. There are many ways. At Pentecost, God speaks many languages. Do not fear what they fear. Jesus is Lord. And if we know Jesus, then we already know the heart of God.

But figuring out what that means day to day is hard work. Knowing who God is takes a lifetime of work and prayer and study. But that's our job as the church together, to know God. And in our story from the book of Acts, the apostle Paul gives us some helpful advice for this difficult task. In a world just like Paul's, that is full of religions, and multiple ways to

¹ Rev. Carol Howard Merritt, http://day1.org/7833-carol_howard_merritt_i_will_not_leave_you_orphaned

know God, our job as the church is the same as it has always been. First, as the church, we are to affirm what we share in common with other faiths and second, we are to know what makes us different as followers of Jesus.

First, we affirm what we share in common with others. There is so much that connects us as human beings. From the awe that we feel in nature to the comfort we know in family and friends. So many religions celebrate these wonders and the deep mysteries of birth and love and sacrifice and death. Whether we are Christian or Muslim or Buddhist or Wiccan or atheist. We all share the experience of being human. Of being joyful or feeling lost or worrying about our children's future. And I appreciate what the apostle Paul says to the Athenians: "God is not far from each one of us. In him, we live and move and have our being; this God who made the world and everything in it... we too are his offspring." Paul first identifies what we all have in common. And that's part of our difficult work as the church. Identifying those things we share in faith. Acknowledging those points we agree on. And when it comes to knowing God, it does not make the church weaker to affirm other ways.

It makes us stronger. It makes us more faithful to know there are places we have yet to discover God.

“I see how extremely religious you are,” Paul says to the Athenians. And it’s a big deal for Paul to say this. Because Paul comes from a one-way kind of faith, with one God and a singular tendency to insist on one path to righteousness. Yet here is Paul in Athens, a diverse, cosmopolitan city of many gods and goddesses, so different and so foreign and so wrong by Jewish standards, and yet here Paul does not start with what is wrong. Paul starts with what they share. He finds common ground. He notices their shrines. He examines their idols. “I see how extremely religious you are,” he says. Me too. I see how you honor strength and courage. Me too. I see how you pray for healing when you are sick or discouraged. Me too. I see how you long for connection and love. Me too. I see that you need grace and mercy and a god who can forgive you. Me too.” Paul identifies what he shares with these religions. And that’s what we are to do as the church are to do first. When we talk about the God we know, we acknowledge the God who is already there, that others are already seeking. That is already with them and already loves

them. Because our God is the God of all of us. And in God, we all live and move and have our being.

First, we talk about what we share. And then we talk about what makes us different. Our God is in everything but we don't believe that everything is of God. Paul shows us we are different as Christians. And that we have to know what that difference means in this world of many faiths. Our God is more than beautiful sunsets and nice days at the beach. Knowing God is more than knowing to be nice and helpful to others. The Lord we know is the Lord Jesus. Who came in the flesh in a particular time and place and did particular things. Who in particular, gave up his spot in heaven and was born in a stable to an unwed mother. And hung out with fishermen and tax collectors. And gave sight to the blind and set the captives free. And lived for us and died for us and rose again for us. This is our Lord and God.

And so there are things in this world that are not our God, that pretend to be our God. Paul identifies idols among the Athenians, statues of silver and gold, made by human hands, that look like they might be god, but they aren't. They are just human creations, Paul says. They have no

power to save and no authority over us. And we as the church, we name those idols in the world. We name those things that pretend to be god but are not. In this world of multiple gods, we know a particular truth; that money is not god. The power is not god. Productivity is not god. Work is not god. Bigger and faster and better are not god. More is not god. Our schedules are not god. Activities are not god. The opinions of others are not god. The most powerful people in this world, they are not god. The authorities and enemies who threaten us, they are not god. The empires of violence and greed that use people and cast them aside, they are not god. None of those things can save us. None of them are in charge. And in the end, they do not have the final say. God does. God alone is God. And as the church, it's our job to proclaim that. To let the world know, that the God we know in Jesus Christ is none of those things. What idols can we identify in our own lives? What things that are not God do we need to release?

The God we know has invited us to a banquet. The God we know has hidden a treasure in the world for us to find where the least are the greatest and the last are first. The God we know loves this world. And

loves us. And loves enemies and persecutors, like Paul once was. The God we know loves us enough to lay down his life for us. Just to be with us. Whether we have it right or not. Whether we understand or not. God in Jesus Christ loves us to hell and back. And is with us in life and in death. God is with us. Faithfully. That is the God we know.

As the church we know God. And we affirm what we share in common with this world of many faiths. And we share what makes us different in Christ. And we seek to know that more and more. Without fear because we are eager to do what is good. Because God in Jesus Christ is eager to be with us.