

WHAT WE KNOW

John 15:9-17

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 6, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Passage

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Prayer: Lord, may the gleams which flash across my mind be not mine, but yours. And may they speak not just to me, but to us. In the name of Christ I pray. Amen.

Even for those of us who live with or seek religious faith, it is easy to focus on what we don't know.

- If we turn to our scriptures and begin with Genesis 1, we cannot really tell whether God created all things "out of nothing," or whether the "formless void" and "waters" were pre-existing materials out of which God shaped the world. It is possible that in their openness to the mystery of God, the Jewish poet who crafted this creation story wished to affirm both possibilities.¹
- We don't really know the reasons for evil, *why* bad things happen to good people; why God makes the sun to rise "on the evil and on the good" sends rain "on the just and on the unjust"; why, as Ecclesiastes says, "there are righteous people who *perish* in their righteousness, and...wicked people who *prolong their life* in their evildoing."²
- On a less cosmic and theological level, we don't really know what will happen or in our lives in the next decade or year, month or minute.
- Nor do we know when the next heroic act will restore our faith in human nature; when the next executive order, legislation, or court ruling will alter the lives of many in our land and possibly our lives as well; when the next war will erupt or treaty be signed; when the next teenager will be killed by gunfire huddled beneath a table in a suburban school, or when the next child will die doing her homework in front of the window of the housing project in which she lives. Nor do we know why one death attracts our sympathy and attention when others pass us by barely noticed.
- Again, Ecclesiastes:
When I applied my mind to know wisdom,
And to see the business that is done on earth...
I saw all the work of God,
That no one can find out
What is happening under the sun...
Even though those who are wise will *claim* to know,
They cannot find it out.³

There are many things we don't know.

II.

But this we know.

- A human being who lived in the region of Palestine in the first century – a freed person, not a slave; Jewish, not Gentile; male, not female; a person of humble birth, short life, premature death carried out by the state at the request of religious authorities – while being fully human claimed also to be an apocalyptic, quasi- mystical figure

¹ Theodore Hiebert, "Excursus: Creation: Ordering Chaos," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2003), 5.

² Ecclesiastes 7:15.

³ Ecclesiastes 8:16-17.

from heaven the Book of Daniel⁴ called “the Son of Man.”⁵ As mysterious as the phrase and claim were, among those who knew him it had some credibility, because he taught as one “having authority,”⁶ he displayed power over disease⁷ and nature⁸ which, while not unheard of in his time, was impressive and a bit frightening.

- But the point at which he garnered most attention was when, after his death and burial, he was raised from the dead in a form that had both continuity⁹ with his earthly body but was also transformed¹⁰ into something different enough that it took even people who knew him well a while to recognize him.¹¹ Resurrected, he became what his later interpreter Paul would call a “spiritual body.”¹²
- After his resurrection, he appeared to enough of his followers – showing them his hands and feet,¹³ eating in their presence,¹⁴ explaining that he was in the fact the one for whom they had left all and followed¹⁵ – that they believed him and *told* others who *told* others who *told* others.
- Forty days after he was raised from the dead he ascended into heaven¹⁶; and the belief that he was God spread like wildfire over land and sea, took institutional form in the Roman Catholic Church, and, with the formation of the Holy Roman Empire, became one of the two or three key organizing ideals of Western civilization into whose well-developed and possibly later stages *we* have been born.

Thus, we come here, to this Sanctuary, Sunday after Sunday, or venture here for the first time, gathered around a belief that this human being, Jesus of Nazareth, was in fact the Son of God, the Anointed One, the Christ, the Messiah:

Crucified dead and buried...

The third day he rose again from the dead...

Ascended into heaven;

And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

III.

In the midst of all in this world we don't know, we know we have heard him say, in our reading this morning:

... I have called you *friends*,

Because I have *made known* to you

Everything that I have heard from my Father.

The word translated “friends” in this text is deeper than the casual meaning the word often has in English. In Greek it is *philos*, one of three Greek words translated “love.” *Philos* refers more to the kind of love that exists in healthy relationships between siblings – brother to brother, sister to sister, sister to brother – the kind of love that exists between friends which prompts them to think of one another as brother or sister. *Philos*. Love. From it we get Philadelphia, the “city of brotherly love,” not the “city of friendship.”

...I have called you *beloved*,

Because I have made known to you

Everything that I have heard from my Father.

In other words, though there are many things we don't know, we do know that we are loved, loved by the risen Christ, loved by the Christ ascended into heaven, loved by the God who is his father and our father:

...I have called you *beloved*...

This is what we know.

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As I told the New Testament class which ended last week a story which has circulated for years about the most prolific theologian in the twentieth century, Karl Barth. Barth wrote in German. His sentences last for paragraphs. His images come so quickly across the pages it is difficult to absorb them. Many people cannot read Barth, because his writing is so dense that it more than taxes the mind.

⁴ Daniel 7.

⁵ Mark 10:45. Jesus is referred to as “Son of Man” 69 times in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke).

⁶ Mark 1:22.

⁷ Mark 1:21-28.

⁸ Mark 4:35-41.

⁹ John 20:20.

¹⁰ John 20:19, where Jesus appears to the disciples by somehow going through locked doors.

¹¹ Luke 24:16, 37; John 20:14, 24-29, 21:4.

¹² I Corinthians 15:44.

¹³ John 20:20.

¹⁴ John 21:15-19.

¹⁵ Luke 24:27.

¹⁶ Acts 1:6-11.

But the story is told that on his one trip to America, in 1962, he was speaking the Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago. A student asked if Professor Barth could summarize his whole life's work in one sentence. Barth answered: "Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"¹⁷

...I have called you *beloved*.

We know that we are loved.

III.

From this knowledge flow many other things for us, flow naturally, like water down a stream, light from sunrise.

- From knowing that we are loved by God, flows a fundamental relationship to others marked by that same love, that same flow.
- From knowing that we are loved by God, flows a seamless web of remaining in that love, of loving others, of keeping the commandments of the one by whom we are loved, of experiencing a deep sense of joy, of loving one another in the close-knit community of the church.
- From knowing that we are loved by God, flows a fundamental approach toward people that loves them even when the form of our love has to hold them responsible for what they have done, has to be love that is tough, tough love.
- At the other end of the spectrum, from knowing that we are loved by God, flows a fundamental love that may call upon us to make great sacrifices – literal or figurative – on behalf of those we love:
 - Parent for child
 - Adult child for parent
 - Sibling for sibling
 - Friend for friend
 - Church member for church member
 - Soldier or sailor for fellow citizen or nation.

IV.

Taking all these words about love from Jesus and speaking as a clergyperson and as a human being, I can say that my own experience of love for and from others – parents, children and step children, spouse, church members – has rarely been of the outwardly emotional type and is often not sentimental. The love I have experienced from God is not characterized by much laughter or ecstasy.

I have not heard God calling my name three times at night as did Samuel.¹⁸

- I have not danced before the Lord like King David.¹⁹
- I have only barely heard the still small voice Elijah heard.²⁰
- The risen Christ has not spoken my name outside a tomb as he did to Mary,²¹ nor called me on the road to Damascus as he did to Paul.²²
- I have never received tongues as of fire like the apostles at Pentecost, giving rise to speculation that I and those with me might be drunk, as was speculated of the early apostles.²³
- I have not seen a vision of all kinds of food suddenly rendered clean like Peter,²⁴ nor a vision of new heavens and new earth like John imprisoned on the isle of Patmos.²⁵

But instead, I have been given a deep trust – I would even say *knowledge* – that I – we – are loved by God. What I *know* of that love provides me, *almost* without fail, with

- A sense of security
- A sense of solidity
- A sense of protection
- A sense of trust in the fate of the universe and my own fate

¹⁷ See <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/01/did-karl-barth-really-say-jesus-loves-me-this-i-know/>.

¹⁸ I Samuel 3.

¹⁹ II Samuel 6.

²⁰ I Kings 19.

²¹ John 20:11-18.

²² Acts 9.

²³ Acts 2.

²⁴ Acts 10.

²⁵ Revelation 1:9-20.

- A sense that God *is* always present, *has always been* present, *will always be* present as figurative whisperer in the ear saying, “You will get through this, Larry,” leading to a quiet confidence on my part that “This, too, shall pass,” and even that enduring it might produce character.²⁶

Never in my most harrowing moments have I worried about the *absence* of God enough to shake my fundamental *trust* in God. I know that I am unusual in this regard. The reality of this does not mean my faith is stronger or superior to the people here today – and those not here – who feel that God has taken leave from their lives or from the situation at hand. But in times of joy and times of sorrow, and in the ordinary times which predominate in between, I know that I *am* loved by God, that we are loved by God, all of us. And that is what keeps me going.

III.

As I indicated last week, the word “abide” is important to me, and it appears twice at the outset of our reading, connected with Christ’s love for us.

If you keep my commandments [Christ says],
You will *abide* in my love,
Just as I have kept my Father’s commandments
And *abide* in his love.

In Greek the word “abide” is *meinen*, from which we get the word “remain.” “You will *remain* in my love,” Christ says, “just as I ... *remain* in God’s love.” Abide. Remain. We never have to leave. God never leaves.

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In Bernard Pomerance’s play, *The Elephant Man*, Dr. Frederick Treves asks the hopelessly deformed “elephant man,” John Merrick, a patient Treves has brought to the London Hospital for treatment and research:

Treves: You are happy here, are you not, John?
Merrick: Yes.
Treves: The baths have rid you of the odor, have they not?
Merrick: First chance I had to bathe regular...
Treves: And three meals a day delivered to your room?
Merrick: Yes, sir.
Treves: This is your Promised Land, is it not? A roof. Food. Protection. Care. Is it not?
Merrick: Right, Mr. Treves.
Treves: I’ll bet you don’t know what to call this.
Merrick: No, sir. I don’t know.
Treves: You call it, Home.
Merrick: Never had a home before.
Treves: You have one now. Say it, John: Home.
Merrick: Home.
Treves: No, no, really say it. I have a home. This is my. Go on.
Merrick: I have a home. This is my home. This is my home. I have a home. As long as I like?
Treves: That is what a home is.
Merrick: That is what is home.²⁷

Let’s say it:

I have a home.
I have a home.
This is my home.
This is my home.
I have a home.
I have a home.
This is my home.
This is my home.
As long as I like.
As long as I like.

“Abide in me as I abide in you.” This is our home. As long as we like. This is what we know.

Amen.

²⁶ Romans 5:3-4.

²⁷ Bernard Pomerance, *The Elephant Man* (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1979), Scene VIII, pages 24-25.