

KNOWING GOD*by Rev. Elaine Poproski*

I'm reading from John 17:25 – 26. This is the end of Jesus' prayer for his disciples – the ones with him when he prayed it as well as all the disciples that would follow, including us.

Jesus prayed: "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

Does God want to be your friend? Does God like You? Is it even appropriate to be talking about God liking us or befriending us? Is friendship with God as valuable as being a child of God? Do I want to be a friend of God? Is it possible to be God's friend? Is it appropriate or right?

Any or all of these questions might have been floating around in your mind since last Sunday. There might be things I said that you profoundly disagree with, or that don't quite sit right for you. That's o.k. I'm o.k. with you disagreeing or questioning. Because I know that God wants to be known by us, I have complete confidence that he can answer your questions, settle your doubts, ease your fears... Just like I know he does with me and has been doing with people from the beginning. I know that when I'm wrong, God will correct me. I know that when I need a new way of understanding, God will provide. I also know that all of that is contingent on me wanting to know God – on us wanting to know God.

Regardless of whether or not you're thrown by the title of this series – Friendship with God – I hope you'll go on this journey. Because the word *friendship* isn't what's most important. The thing that's most important is that we're going to be talking and thinking about knowing God. We're going to be challenged and encouraged, I expect, by the knowability of God. Not that we can know God completely – we are the created and he is the Creator, after all, but that doesn't mean we can't know him.

So let's talk about knowing God.

Let me start by asking the question: What's the difference between knowing *about* God and knowing God?

Think of it in terms of people. I know all sorts of things about the Queen of England. I know where she lives. I know she likes dogs and horses. I know her dad's name and her kids' names. You probably know about the Queen of England as well. But would any of us say we know her? Probably not. Because even if knowing someone includes knowing about them, knowing about someone does not automatically imply that we know them.

We probably have gut sense of what it means to know someone, but I think it can be helpful to actually try to articulate what it means. To do that, I'm going to draw upon some work by David Matheson, a philosophy professor from Carleton University.

Matheson suggests that the difference between knowing *about* someone and knowing someone is that we can't really know someone unless that person intentionally chooses to share things about themselves with us. And those things they share must be shared with us specifically, as opposed to us being lumped in with a larger group, like when people post things on Facebook. This is the first point: for us to know someone, that someone must choose to intentionally share things about themselves with us, specifically.

The second point is, quite simply, that the things shared must be true.

Third, those things must be communicated in a way we can understand. If someone shares all sorts of real, intimate truths about themselves, but they share them all in Arabic and all we speak is English, we still won't know them. Similarly, if they're writing a letter to a larger group, and include some secret, hidden things that are just for us, but we don't realize either that those secret, hidden things are in the letter, or that they're meant for us, it still can't be said that we actually know the person. Because to know someone, this is Matheson's fourth point, and though it might seem obvious, it is important to point out, we actually need to know *that* the person is sharing things about themselves.ⁱ

As with any subject of philosophy and meaning, the academic conversations about what it means to know someone are way more nuanced than what I've just presented. But for our purposes, I find Matheson's theory helpful. I think his argument is sound. I think the points he makes, make sense. And I think they're completely and convincingly transferrable to our topic of knowing God.

So I'd like to run through them again, this time through the lens of knowing God.

Throughout history, God has over and over again intentionally chosen to share things about himself with people. And not just groups of people, not just through

some third party like a prophet or Scripture, but directly – to specific people. And that’s what God continues to do. He intentionally chooses to share things about himself with you, with me, specifically. This, of course, is Matheson’s first point about knowing persons.

Second, the things God shares about himself are only and always true. They are objectively true. God will never tell lies about who he is.

Third, because God made us, he will share the things he wants to share with us in a way we will understand. That’s not to say we won’t need other people or we won’t need the Holy Spirit to help us understand, but what God wants to share with us will be understandable. If you speak English, he won’t speak to you in Arabic.

And finally, God will not share things about himself in such obscure or subtle ways that we won’t know he’s sharing things about himself in the first place. He’ll make sure we know.

It really is one of the most amazing things, that God has made it possible for us to know him. To a lot of people, even the idea sounds presumptuous. “You mean to tell me you actually think you can know God? Like, he talks to you? Like he even knows who you are? Like he doesn’t have more important things to do with his time than share things about himself with you?”

Yep. It sounds pretty presumptuous, but it’s true. The question is not whether or not *God* wants to *be* known or if he makes it *possible* for us to know him. The question is: do *we want* to know him?

Let’s press pause on that question for a moment. Because I think it’s important to acknowledge something before we answer it: to know God can be a terrifying thing. I believe it is an amazing and wonderful thing, but it is also terrifying.

Because God isn’t just a sweet baby in a manger. God isn’t just a carpenter’s son or our “very present help in trouble,” or even our “refuge and strength.” God is also named, in both the Old Testament and the New, an all-consuming or devouring fire (Deut. 4:24, Heb. 12:29). And if that image doesn’t frighten you, consider Hosea 11.

In Hosea 11, the prophet is speaking of Israel’s repeated betrayals – their choice over and over again to walk away from God. He says this: “They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling.” It reminds me of that scene from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, in which Susan asks if Aslan – who is the God/Christ figure in the story, and who is

portrayed as a lion – is safe. The response is this: “Safe? Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe.”

Those of you who know the story know that’s not the end of the answer. It continues: “But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

I think it’s not a bad thing if we’re a bit scared of God – of knowing God. All through the Bible people talk of the “fear of the Lord.” Often we try to soften that fear, to make it mean something more like awe and reverence. And it does mean that. But it also means fear. Actual, heart-pounding, cower-inducing fear. Because God is a holy, devouring fire, a roaring lion before whom his people tremble.

In Matthew 10 we’re cautioned to “fear him [God] who can destroy both body and soul in hell.” The spectre of God who is judge of all, who cannot and will not tolerate sin, even in the tiniest bit, *should* cause us to pause for a moment. This is the same God who was so disgusted with the evil of humanity that in Genesis 6 we read that he sent a great flood to almost completely wipe out everyone from the face of the earth.

Do we want to know God?

You may have already gone here in your own head while I was talking about the fear of God. You may be thinking of words like those of Psalm 130: If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? BUT with you there is forgiveness.” Or maybe you’re thinking of Peter’s point from his 2nd letter in the New Testament, in which he explains that God doesn’t want anyone to perish in the final judgement and that that’s the reason he keeps putting off the final judgment (2 Peter 3:9). Maybe you have in mind Jesus, who is God-with-us, who freed us from the terrifying judgment of God by absorbing our sin and suffering God’s judgment on our behalf, thus offering salvation freely to everyone. Maybe you’re remembering John’s words that God didn’t send Jesus to condemn us, but to save us (John 3:17). To quote another Psalm: The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? (Ps. 27)

For those who have confessed that Jesus is Lord and believed that God raised him from the dead, there really is nothing about God to fear. We are named his children, whom he loves. I hope you know that. I hope you know that God loves the world – loves us – loves you – so much that he sent his only Son so that everyone (including you) who believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life (John 3:16).

And yet, even with all of that wonderfulness – all of that assurance of God’s grace and forgiveness and love – the idea of knowing God can still be a scary thing. I think that’s because to know God, is to be changed by God. There’s no way around it. The more we get to know God, the less we will be like we were. This is one of the biggest differences between knowing *about* God and knowing God. It is possible to know all *about* God without it changing one thing about us. But it is not possible to know God and remain unchanged. Some of the changes are easy, but many are not. Some of the changes we will welcome, but many we won’t. At least not at first.

And on top of all that, there’s no way to predict what will change and in what order. The only thing we can know with certainty is that knowing God makes us more like Jesus.

So I ask again: Do you want to know God?

Maybe you already know God. If so, the question is this: Do you want to know God *more*? Because there’s always more to know. God is like an infinitely deep pool into which we may dive, but we will never reach the bottom.

I want us to take a couple minutes right now to sit with this question and consider our answer.

Do you want to know God? Maybe you need to make a list of pros and cons. Maybe you need to recite last week’s words from Psalm 42: *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O Lord.* Maybe you need to turn those words into a request that it be made so. Maybe you need to speak out loud to God, naming your fears or your hopes or both. Maybe you need to just sit in some quiet and recite the question over and over again: Do I want to know God?

Whatever it is that you need to do, I’m going to pause for a couple minutes so you can do it.

Quiet for 2 minutes.

It’s possible that you haven’t had nearly enough time with this question. If that’s the case, I hope you’ll keep contemplating it throughout the coming week. In fact, if you need to stop listening to this sermon altogether so you can keep focusing on this question right now, please do that. This is one of the most important questions in the world. Because it is in knowing God, and being changed by God, that we become part of making God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. And *that* is the hope our world desperately needs.

Now, here's the hard part. Deciding *yes, I want to know God*, is just the beginning. Sometimes I wish all I had to do was say, *God, I want to know you*, and he'd take care of all the rest. But knowing someone is never accomplished that way. Imagine if you saw someone and thought, I'd really like to get to know them. Maybe you tell them you'd like to get to know them and they tell you they want to get to know you, but then you never call them, you never talk to them, you don't listen to any of the things they tell you about themselves... I think it's safe to say you'll never actually get to know them. To know someone – anyone – requires that we do something about it. It's the same with knowing God. It's not enough to just decide we want to know him, or even to tell him we want to know him. We also have to do something about it. That's what we're going to be talking about over the coming weeks.

There are proven things people have been doing for thousands of years to put themselves in a position to know God. We call these things Spiritual Disciplines. They have been part of Christianity since the time of Jesus (before Christianity even *was* Christianity). They are things like prayer, fasting, worship, confession, service... there's a whole list. And over the coming weeks (and likely months) we're going to talk about many of them.

There are two things we need to be clear about before moving forward. The first is this: Practicing things like prayer, fasting, worship, etc. does not *make* God show up and share things about himself with us. These things we call Spiritual Disciplines aren't what make us know God. They simply put us in a position to meet God so that we are in a position to hear the things *he chooses* to share about himself with us. One author I read put it this way: the Spiritual Disciplines “develop [in us] the capacity to discern and respond to the mystery, the presence, and the will of God.”ⁱⁱ

The second thing we need to be clear about is this: Spiritual Disciplines are tools proven to effectively move us closer to our goal, which is knowing God and, in that way, being formed into the image of Christ, but they are tools. They are not the goal. Mastering them is not the goal.

As we become more familiar with the tools and as we become more adept at using them, we will find it easier to be in a position to meet God and to know God. But even as we become better at using the tools, they will always require effort and we will always need to be intentional about using them. It is the reality of sin and evil that there will always be a force at play determined to interrupt our relationship with God – to block us from knowing God. And so it is essential that we practice Spiritual Disciplines consistently and deliberately such that they become habits.

Do you want to know God?

I wonder if your answer is different, or less sure, than it was a few minutes ago, before I started talking about all the work and effort we will have to put in to know God.

Here's the thing. I know that a lot of us in this Zoom room this morning are exhausted. I know that a lot of us feel like we already have more on our plates than we should, and all this just sounds like too much. I'm not going to lie to you, making room to learn and practice Spiritual Disciplines won't be easy. We may have to make some changes. We may have to make some difficult choices. But then again, that's kinda what we sign up for when we choose to follow Jesus in the first place. That being said, we are going to go slow and gradual.

Have you ever gone swimming in really cold water? Some of you might dive right in, figuring it's best to get the shock of the cold over with. That's not how I get in. I go slow. I take a step and wait for that part of my body to get used to the temperature (or go numb, whichever). Then I take another step and wait again. This usually goes on for ages, until I'm up to my neck, at which point I'll finally swim. That's how we learn Spiritual Disciplines. We move in one step at a time. slowly. gradually. We try something manageable, something that's doable given all the other things in our lives. And we stay there until we're ready to go a bit deeper. Because the goal isn't getting to the other side of whatever metaphorical body of water we're imagining. The goal is simply to keep going deeper.

The beautiful, wonderful thing about God is that he can and will meet us wherever we are, even if we're just in toe deep. Richard Foster, who wrote one of the seminal books on Spiritual Disciplines of the 20th century, reminds us that Spiritual Disciplines are not meant to be soul-killing, guilt-inducing things. They are not meant to suck us dry. "They are meant to bring the abundance of God into our lives."ⁱⁱⁱ And as such, they are meant to be life-giving, freeing things.

I hope you'll go on this journey with me over the coming weeks. I hope you will say *yes*, even knowing a bit of what that *yes* might cost you, when I ask: Do you want to know God?

One last thing... Last week I invited you to write out the opening words of Psalm 42 and put them on your bathroom mirror so you could read them over and over again as you did whatever you do when standing in front of your bathroom mirror. I'd love for you to keep going with this, this week. Keep reciting the words. Let

them be a prayer of commitment. Or let them be a request that God would place that longing in you.

If you did this all last week, you probably know the words off by heart by now. Ask God to bring them to mind even when you're not in front of your bathroom mirror. May these words be your prayer all week long.

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

ⁱ David Matheson. "Knowing Persons." *Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press) 49, no. 3 (September 2010): 435-453.

ⁱⁱ Davin Carr-Chelman and Michael Kroth. "The Spiritual Disciplines as Practices of Transformation." *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology*. (IGI Global) 8, no. 1 (January 2017), 25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Foster. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Revised Edition. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 9.