

## Let us Know, Let Us Press On To Know God

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 14, 1986. Scripture Lessons: *Hosea 4:1-3; 5:15-6:6*; Psalm 77:11-20; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're sitting at the dinner table after the Sunday morning services. I turn to one of my boys and ask, "What did you learn in Sunday School today?"

"I don't know."

I suppose when I was a little boy I frustrated my parents with the same vague replies. I really can't remember what I learned. I do know that I wouldn't have gone unless my mother made me. And I probably wouldn't be in church today if my mother hadn't dragged me there long ago.

But I do have vivid memories about Sunday school. I remember doing my Sunday school lesson at the last minute on Sunday morning as we bounced along in the car on the way to church. I remember the musty smell of the Sunday school room. I remember the feel of the rough stucco walls in my Sunday School class and a place where a large chunk the size of a piece of paper had fallen off exposing the gray wall. Across from my Sunday school room was the church library. I remember borrowing Fox's Book of Martyrs and taking it home to read as a boy and then wondered if I would have kept the faith if someone had tied me to a stake and lit the kindling.

I especially remember two teachers. One was Dr. Brightbill. He told us to remember his name by thinking of the sun which is bright and a bird beak which is called a bill. Dr. Brightbill was a Dupont scientist. I was at the age when I was beginning to wonder about the seeming discrepancies between science and Christian faith. I can't remember anything I learned in his class but I was impressed that Dr. Brightbill was a scientist and a

Christian who cared enough to try to teach a class of uninterested boys.  
~~Whatever else he taught us learned from him~~  
~~The fact that he was a scientist assured me that the Christian faith has~~  
nothing to fear from science and learning.

I also remember Mr. Saadeh, my high-school youth group leader. He took us to a Jewish synagogue in Wilmington one Friday night. Afterwards we went downstairs in the fellowship hall of the temple, sang *Havilah Nagilla*, danced Jewish folk dances and ate bagels and matza balls. Later we talked to the rabbi about OT prophecies concerning Christ. That experience taught me the value of respectful dialogue with those who don't share our faith in Christ. ~~I also learned that there are~~  
~~I began to realize that there were many~~  
different answers to the question of who Jesus is. ~~I began to realize that~~  
I needed to answer for myself the question Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?"

Another time Mr. Saadeh took the youth group on a trip to Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. There was absolutely no religious ~~justification for~~ <sup>significance to</sup> the trip as far as I could tell. But during the long ride back to Newark I sat up front with Mr. Saadeh and shared with him some of my doubts about God. He listened carefully and asked questions. He respected my thoughts. He didn't argue with me or make me feel guilty or afraid for doubting. It was such a relief to share these doubts with someone who cared. From that experience I learned the value of listening sympathetically to the wildest heresy without condemning it with the hopes of encouraging a person to press on, beyond doubts, to know the Lord.

What are your memories of Sunday school? I wouldn't be surprised if you remember not so much the content of what you learned but your teachers. Because of experiences shared with those teachers you came to know something of the living God and were encouraged to press on to know

*more of God. After all, that's the chief purpose for Sunday School and Christian education. It's to enable us to know God and to press on to know God better.*

*Knowing God is the most important thing in the world. That's what the prophet Hosea believed. I believe it too. Although mass starvation and the threat of nuclear war are monumental concerns, the ultimate issue confronting people of every generation is knowing God. Hosea complained "there's no knowledge of God in the land; there's swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder." His description of life twenty-five hundred years ago sounds like our evening news. We live in a nation where one third of the people claim to have had a born again religious experience. On any given Sunday nearly half the people in the United States go to church and yet murder, sexual immorality, stealing, lying are as common today as in the days of Hosea. We're a religious people but are we a people who know our God?*

*This ignorance of God affects not only human relationships but nature as well. For example, Hosea saw a relationship between the knowledge of God and a clean environment. "Because there's no knowledge of God in the land therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air; and even the fish of the sea are taken away." For Hosea acid rain, toxic waste and the threat of a nuclear winter are not simply political problems. They're theological problems. They're moral problems. At the root of all these things is ignorance of God.*

*That knowledge of God of which Hosea spoke contains at least four characteristics. I want us now to consider now what these four things*

are.

*The knowledge of God is first of all, a personal knowledge.* It's not a ritual thing. It's not a matter of burnt offerings and going through the rituals of worship. Those things are important and Hosea wasn't condemning ritual. Our worship ritual is important to me. But going through the rituals doesn't mean we know God.

Neither is knowing God simply knowing about God. It's a matter of dealing with God personally. Knowing something *about* God is important. Knowledge about God found in the Bible can help us to recognise the living God when we encounter him in our own experience. But we can memorize the Bible and quote it to prove all our prejudices but still not know the living God.

There's a well known story in the OT about Samuel. His mother, Hannah, dedicated Samuel to the Lord at an early age and took him to Eli, the high-priest where he learned about God. One night before he really knew the Lord Samuel was sleeping in the temple when he heard someone call him by name. He thought it was old Eli but it was really God calling. Three times he heard this voice. Finally Eli realised that it must be God calling Samuel and instructed him to "go, lie down and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for thy servant hears.'" Samuel had known about God but he hadn't, till then, known God personally. That, I believe, is the goal of Christian education; not simply to teach the Bible, but to encounter God personally like Samuel did.

*Secondly, you can't really know God without obeying God.* Knowing God isn't a matter of mystical contemplation or ecstatic experience but of action. Anybody who says "I know God, and keeps not his commandments", St. John says, "is a liar." That's pretty blunt!

Presbyterians have always stressed that the knowledge of God and the service of God are inseparable. There's solid biblical evidence to support that emphasis. For example, the prophet Jeremiah was directed by God to speak to the king of Judah. He boldly went to the king and said, "Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place." And then he adds, *"Is not this to know me?" says the Lord.* In other words, "This is what it means to know me", says the Lord, "to obey me, to do justice and righteousness, to deliver from the hand of the oppressor and to protect the alien, the fatherless, and the widow."

The knowledge of God can't be separated from issues of justice. The person who's pressing on to know God sometimes finds it necessary, like Jeremiah, to speak out against social injustice. To know God is to do that. The church that's pressing on to know God will study to know how God wants us to address the problems of our day. That's why our church will study peacemaking for the next eight weeks beginning next Sunday afternoon. Dick Winchester will be leading the study. I hope that you'll participate in that study. That's one concrete way we can press on to know God.

*Thirdly, knowing God is a matter of grace.* It's a relationship in which the initiative is with God. Philosophers have come up with all sorts of proofs for God's existence but they bring little comfort to a doubting soul. "The world did not know God through wisdom" Paul wrote. We don't come to know God because we're clever or good. We know God only because God, in his grace, has taken the initiative.

Jesus expressed this thought in our Gospel lesson. The good shepherd

doesn't wait for the lost sheep to find its way back home. The poor woman doesn't wait for the lost coin to turn up some day by chance. In the same way, God takes the initiative and in Christ comes seeking us out until we're found.

The apostle Paul expresses the same thought in our epistle lesson. Paul was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a bully. But God changed Paul. God took the initiative. So Paul could testify "the grace of our Sovereign overflowed for me". Knowing God, then, is a matter of grace. And so often that grace of God is made flesh by teachers who, like the Good Shepherd, go out looking for the lost sheep.

*Above all, knowing God, is knowing Jesus Christ.* In the high-priestly prayer of Jesus in John chapter 17 we overhear Jesus say to God, "this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." The purpose of church school, then, is to enable men, women, and children to press on to know God through Jesus Christ.

Emile Cailliet for many years was the Stuart Professor of Christian Philosophy at Princeton Seminary. In his biography he tells how he came to know Jesus Christ. He was raised in a thoroughly secular atmosphere in France. Though educated in some of the best schools and universities Cailliet was an adult before he'd even seen a Bible. It happened this way. He had the good fortune of marrying a devout Scotch-Irish Presbyterian girl. She must have been hurt to the very core of her being that Cailliet was hostile to religion. But one day his wife was walking down a street in Paris when she passed a little Huguenot or French Reformed church. On a lark she went inside where she met the pastor, a tall white-haired man who reminded her of an OT patriarch. She asked him for a French Bible and

he gave her one.

That evening her husband came home and saw the book. "What's this?" he asked.

"It's a Bible" she said a little fearfully.

"A Bible! I've never seen a Bible!"

Cailliet picked up the Bible and took it into his study. He thumbed through it and began reading the Beatitudes. The words filled him with awe and wonder and an indescribable warmth surged within him. "I continued to read deeply into the night," he wrote, "mostly from the gospels. And lo and behold, as I looked through them, the One of whom they spoke, the One who spoke and acted in them, became alive to me. Its pages were animated by the Presence of the Living God and the Power of His mighty acts. To this God I prayed that night, and the God who answered was *the same God* of whom it was spoken in the Book."

That's the hope and aim of all our Christian education; not simply to learn about God or learn Bible stories, but, by God's grace, to know God personally through Jesus Christ and to obey him. "Let us know, let us press on the know God." Amen.

Let us pray: O God, remember those who have been created in your image but have not known the redeeming work of our Saviour Jesus Christ; and grant that, by the prayers and labors of your holy Church, thy may be brought to know and worship you as you have been revealed in your Son; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.