

Sermon :: 19-Oct-2025
Proper 24, Year C

“ for they shall all *know* me, ... says the LORD ”

For fifteen years, the Presbyterian church that Jim and I called home before we became Episcopalians was in Princeton, New Jersey ... just a block away from the most prominent Presbyterian seminary in the United States. The church’s pews were brimming with professors whose subject areas sounded so interesting: Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis... of Greek Language and New Testament ... of Church History ... Mission and Evangelism ... Pastoral Care ... Ethics ... and, of course, Homiletics.

But the one that always intrigued—perhaps *tantalized*—me most was *Systematic Theology*. Now, THE-LOGY is our human *knowledge*—or, at least, the closest we can *come* to knowledge—*about God*. But it was the *systematic* part that *really* grabbed my inner nerd: Imagine, I thought, a body of knowledge about God so well studied ... critiqued ... written down ... and—best of all!—*systematized* ... that it must be almost like a computer: Ask a question about, say, the Trinity ... or human suffering ... or the Final Coming of Christ ... and out pops a fully vetted, ready-to-go, authoritative answer ... about **everything-God**.

Needless to say, when I finally *got* to seminary ... I was quickly disabused of the idea that there exists any theological ‘Magic Eight Ball,’ with definitive answers for all our questions concerning God: Despite two thousand years of inquiry, argument and doctrine ... there *is* no **one right answer** about **anything-God!**¹ As the fifth-century theologian Augustine famously wrote in his *Confessions*, all theology is really “faith [] in *search of* understanding.” We can *never* reduce God to some finite collection of facts and principles, via the *logic* of our *heads*. Whatever knowledge of God we have arises, rather, from our *faith*: from our *belief* and *trust in the* God ... **in the** Jesus ... Whom we’re endlessly *seeking*—spiritually *journeying*—to understand ... via the *discernment* of our *hearts*.

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And. And *yet*, our human knowledge of God *also* cannot be ‘*anything goes*’: God can’t simply be *Whoever* and *Whatever I* say God is. We *need* some *boundaries* around what we can legitimately—*truly*—say regarding Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Otherwise ... if the truth about God were merely whatever *sounded* right to **us** ... we’d be worshiping little more than an *idol*: some crazy-quilt image of a *human*-built God, reflecting all our biases and bumbblings ... and *not* the Ultimate *God*, straddling Creation in love and power, majesty and mercy.

Indeed, we preceive this tension playing out in the ‘arc’ of our lessons for today: *First*, we hear the prophet Jeremiah looking forward, in hope, to a day when “all will know the LORD, from the least ... to the greatest”: an idyllic era² when the law of God will be written upon the hearts of *all*, so, as God says, “I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” But *then* the author of the Second Letter to Timothy admonishes that, sooner or later, the “people will not *put up* with *sound* teaching, but,

¹ Indeed, the ‘systematic’ part of Systematic Theology is its effort to coalesce all the varying branches of theology—scriptural, liturgical / sacramental, missional, pastoral, practical, etc—into a single more or less coherent human understanding of God. It is not about making any single, definitive-for-all-time theological statements.

² Jeremiah, writing at the time of the Babylonian captivity, is looking ahead to the *post-exile*, when all of the People of God are once again gathered in the land of Israel and steadfast in upholding their end of the covenant with Yahweh.

having their *ears tickled*³—that is, delighting in doctrines and interpretations of their *own* choosing—“they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their *own* desires.” And thus, in the *end*, Jesus predicts, when the Son of Man finally comes again, He will be compelled to ask, Is there *any* faith on earth?

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This tension between the God Whom we *discern* and the God Who truly *is* ... is both very *real* and very *contemporary*. Several times a *week*, I have conversations with one or more of you ... about how **certain of** our Christian brothers and sisters are preaching—boldly and self-assuredly—a theology—that is, supposedly, a knowledge-of-God—that’s grounded in *judgment*: ¶how certain sins of body or sins of belief will (somehow) *forfeit* one’s salvation; ¶how certain people, because of who they identify as ... where they come from ... how they came here ... whom they love ... what they believe in ... how their bodies are formed ... or how much they’re worth, in dollars-and cents ... (somehow) don’t merit the love, charity or respect afforded all *other* human beings; ¶how God favors only *one* side of a given war or conflict ... and (somehow) sees as justified the suffering of the people on the other; ¶how the values of generations past ... static, hoary hierarchies of household, of church and of power ... are (somehow) more righteous, in God’s sight, merely by dint of being older ... often, I might add, while conveniently overlooking that the ‘God-given’ values they’re espousing just (somehow) ‘happen’ to favor *them*, more than anyone else!⁴

I don’t know about you ... but this sounds to *me* like the theology of a *God* created in *humanity’s* image, rather than the other way around. And it runs great risks of not only fouling the faith of those hold to it, with all manner of human *conceit* ... but also of turning away a generation—or *more*—of seekers who *aren’t attracted* to a God Whom they can glimpse in the bathroom mirror.

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What we need, then, is some *rule* ... some ‘razor’ ... some coherent interpretive *lens* ... that helps ensure we’re actually seeing *God* in our theology ... and not merely a self-deceiving reflection of *ourselves*. And that *rule*, I think, is *Jesus*. His **words** are the razor ... *the way He lived His life* is the interpretive lens ... we can readily use to parse, evaluate and accept-or-reject what *anyone*—and that includes *priests!*—claims to know about God ... and proclaims in Jesus’ Name.

So, what *is* the *definitive theology*—the more or less *objective*⁵ *knowledge-of-God*—we can derive from the Jesus Whom God sent to live, teach, suffer, die and be raised again ... deeply *among* us ... completely in *spite* of us ... and wholly *for* us? Well, I’d suggest any coherent, faithful theology—any *worthy*⁶ understanding-of-God—must check at least *three boxes*:

- First and foremost, any *true* knowledge-of-God *must* be grounded in the *unconditional love* of Jesus: God may not be *pleased* by all that someone does or says or believes ... but God *never abandons* anyone for this, *either*. Long ago, God judged humanity, *once and*

³ You may remember the slightly older translation that refers to our having “itching ears.”

⁴ As one bishop of the Episcopal Church said during a conference I recently attended, this judgment-theology seems to know an *awful lot* of the *Old Testament* and *very little* of the *New*. It tends, he said, to see Jesus as a “mascot and not as Messiah.”

⁵ Maybe even *systematic*?!

⁶ In the root sense of this word: deserving of worship (= WORTH-SHIP).

for all ... found us entirely lacking ... and, in Christ, redeemed us: full stop. God does not *ever* judge us—*any* of us—in a way that puts us beyond ... outside ... God's love, mercy and compassion. And so, *neither* may we. For what is *Jesus'* teaching? "*Love your neighbor*" (Mt 22:39).

- Second, any *true* knowledge-of-God *must* privilege the *self-sacrifice* of Jesus: The Cross is the ensign of Christ because on it, God sacrificed God's all for those who *rejected* God, over and over and over again: Jesus *gloried* in making Himself *lesser*, so *others* could be *greater*. Therefore, any theology we concoct that says *I* get *more*, while *you* get *less* ... *I* am in *power*, while *you* are the *pawns* ... *I* cannot be *questioned*, while *you* say nothing worth *listening* to ... is wholly ungodly ... because it doesn't reflect Jesus' *own* sacrifice—of dignity, of power, of life itself—for the uplifting of everyone *else*. For what is *Jesus'* example? "*Laying down one's life for one's friends*" (Jn 5:13).
- And third, any *true* knowledge-of-God *must* resound in the *hope* that *is* Jesus: Jesus came to do the will of the Father ... and taught us to pray, "*not my will, but yours be done*" (Lk 22:42⁷). This is the hope of *faith* ... the hope that—if we *let* it—leads us to cease our trying to *control* the world ... so the Jesus may flow *through* us, to **perfect** the world: that calls us to strive, in *Jesus'* image, for *justice* for the lowly ... *mercy* for the oppressed ... and *peace*—the *visionary-and-active resolution*⁸ of conflict—for all of creation. For what does *Jesus* say? "*I—I—am the way and the truth and the life*" (Jn 14:6).

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I have grown to *love* the idea of theology's being faith in search of understanding: that an important part of our journey, in *this* life, is coming to *know* God through our individual and collective lived experience: worship and reflection, learning and service. And at the same time, however, I've *also* become *convicted* ... that the *truest* way of *knowing* God ... the single *most coherent, most compelling* revelation made to us of *Who* God is ... *what* God does ... and *where* God seeks to lead us ... are the *words* and the *deeds* of *Jesus*.

And so, anytime you're made uncomfortable by someone who claims to **know** how *God* wants this world to be ... who's *in* and who's *out*; who are the 'rightful' *rulers* and who are destined to **be** ruled; who *gets* and who deserves to get *taken* ... I urge you to ask yourself: Are they modeling *unconditional love*? privileging *self-sacrifice*? emphasizing *hope-in-Christ*? For unless the answer is "Yes" to all *three* ... they're probably saying a whole lot *less* about **God** ... and whole a lot *more* about **themselves**.

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⁷ See also, of course, the Lord's Prayer that Jesus gives us, as well.

⁸ I.e., not mere cessation.