



“Knowing God”

Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 20:1-16

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Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

C.S. Lewis, the famous English writer, had the wonderful gift of explaining things in language and images people could understand. As a consequence, he spent much of his time explaining Christianity to skeptical modern people. In one article, Lewis talked about the difficulty of finding common ground on which to begin the conversation:

Ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the bench and God in the Dock.

Modern people, us included, have created a custom-made God. Guided by culture and our own expectations, the modern God is a very comfortable, often benign God, who affirms our choices, defends our values, and grants us our desires. We have made God in our own image.

Robert Bellah, a Berkeley sociologist, wrote a best-selling book titled *Habits of the Heart*. It is a study of American religion, and reveals the extreme interior character and extreme individualism of much of American religion. Faith, morals and God are our own personal choice and we define each. And, of course, we are certain God agrees with us.

The most famous quote in the book is by Sheila Larson, a young nurse, who said of her faith, "I believe in God. I am not a religious fanatic. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism, just my own little voice."

That kind of interior, individualistic faith ignores five thousand years of Jewish-Christian tradition that speaks of the communal character of faith in God. Sheilaism is also a very narrow thread on which to hang a life. If God is no more than ourselves, we are alone and helpless in a dangerous world.

One consequence of American popular religion is that it tends to empty faith and worship of transcendence, any sense of mystery, or the awe that is essential to Christian faith. It is no less than the trivialization of God. As J.B. Phillips put it a generation ago, *Our God is Too Small*. The loss is profound. Annie Dillard puts it colorfully:

Why do people in our churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a package tour of the Absolute? ...Does anyone have the foggiest idea what

sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?....It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

How different from the faith of the biblical authors and the tradition of the Christian church. One of the Scripture Lessons for this afternoon's ordination service is Isaiah 6. It is the account of the call of Isaiah to prophetic ministry. The prophet recounts that he was in the Temple worshipping God when suddenly he had a vision of the God he was worshipping. He writes, "I saw God high and lifted up and his glory filled the Temple. The Temple shook on its foundations and I cried out, 'Woe is me.'"

Or consider the Psalmist's sheer delight in the beauty and grandeur of God,

O Lord my God, you are great indeed,
clothed in majesty and splendor,
and wrapped in a robe of light.
you have spread out the heavens like a tent
and on their waters laid the beams of your pavilion;
you take the clouds for your chariot,
riding on the wings of the wind;
you make the winds your messengers
and flames of fire your servants....

Some things are best said in poem and song. The Psalms are Exhibit #1. Our Epistle Lesson is another lyrical vision of the God of Israel, the Christian God:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Such visions and images of God are transforming and life changing. A life of faith is shaped by our vision of God. And we all have an image of God. Usually those images are too small and quite inadequate to change our lives. What is your image of God and where did you get it? Does our image of God match the God revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ?

This is an important question. The character of our faith rests in our answer. It is so important, the first part of our church mission statement is "to know God...."

The Gospel Lesson for this Sunday is a parable of Jesus which reveals the character of God and points to the implication of such a vision for the Kingdom of God

The parable begins in a marketplace at six in the morning. A group of men, say twenty-five of them, have gathered there hoping for work as day laborers on the farms around the village. Finding work each day was a matter of hunger or food on the table.

It was harvest time and hope was high. A local landowner arrived and hired five of the men at the customary daily wage, a denarius. He sent them to his vineyard to begin gathering grapes.

Three hours later, the landowner came back to the marketplace. All twenty men were still there waiting for work. The landowner was a generous man and hired five more men promising to pay them what was right.

At noon it was the same story. Fifteen men were left and the landowner hired five more men and told them he would pay them what was right. At three o'clock, the ten remaining men were still unemployed and the landowner hired five more and sent them to his vineyard.

At five o'clock he returned to the market and noticed the five remaining men were still standing there idle. "Why are you standing idle all day?" the landowner asked. "Because no one hired us," they replied. "Well then," the landowner said, "you go to my vineyard and join the other workers."

At 6:00 the quitting whistle blew and the steward of the landowner came with his cash box to pay the workers. The landowner told him to start with the last men hired and work to the first. The steward paid the 5 o'clock hires a denarius, the full daily wage. A ripple of excitement went through the remaining workers. They figured if the one-hour workers were given a full day's pay, the landowner would certainly give them much more. After all they'd worked hard all day long.

To everyone's surprise, the steward paid everyone the same wage—a denarius. Consternation replaced expectation. "We bore the heat of the day," one of the first hired workers complained to the landowner. "We worked harder, longer, and are wearier than those who worked part of the day. It's not fair."

The landowner replied, "My friend, I did you no wrong. We agreed to a denarius and that is what you received. Why are envious of my generosity?"

"That," Jesus said, "is what God is like, and that generosity is the character of the kingdom of God. The first will be last and the last first in the new community God is building on earth." It is an upside-down community in which the ordinary rules are no longer in play. It is a new world based on and created by astonishing generosity.

God intends to bend us toward God's own generous vision of life and the world. God created us not for what God could receive for himself, but for what God can give to us: life, a beautiful world, and God's astonishing generosity. God trusts us with this world for our use and enjoyment. God calls us to stay in touch with that primal grace and let it shape our vision of reality.

God accepts us, forgives us, offers to transform us without reference to what we merit or deserve. God's generosity is not based on our worth or achievements. God just gives, gives, and gives some more. And God wants to create a community that is a resumé-free zone where all stand under the same mercy and grace of God, and offer it to one another and the world.

Jesus is not suggesting this parable is the way to run a business or international affairs. Because of sin and evil, justice is necessary. We must be held accountable for our lives and are responsible for our actions.

But throughout the entire biblical narrative, God is incredibly patient with his world—waiting for us to understand things are not the way they are supposed to be. God longs for us to return to that primal love that marks God's heart and the original creation. In the meantime God withholds judgment.

And God sent Jesus to establish a new community based on God's character of generosity. The church operates on another set of values that sets us off from the world. We are marked by and given the character of God's amazing generosity.

God gives us a choice. We can be shaped by a vision dominated by judgment or our vision can be transformed into a vision based on God's generosity. The consequences of such a vision are profound and transforming.

An old rabbinic story tells of a farmer who had two sons. He taught his sons everything he knew about animals and crops, and when the boys were old enough, entered into partnership with them. When the old man died, he left the farm to his sons who continued the partnership. They shared everything fifty-fifty. And, against the odds, the equal partnership worked and the farm thrived.

The older son never married. The younger son married and had eight children.

One year the harvest was bountiful, and both son's barns and pens were bursting with grain and cattle. One beautiful moonlit night, the older son was musing on his life and thought, "My brother has ten mouths to feed and I have only one. I am blessed beyond measure." He decided that very night he would take some of his grain and animals, sneak over to his brother's side of the farm, and add some of his bounty to his brother's.

That same night, the younger brother was thinking about his life. "I am so blessed," he thought. "I have a wife who loves me and children who are the delight of my life. My brother is alone and lonely." He decided that very night he would take some of his grain and animals and take them to his brother's barn.

Under a cloudless, moonlit sky, the brothers made their way toward each other's barns. To their surprise, they met in the middle. And though the sky was clear, it began to rain. It was God weeping for joy that two of his children got it right.

God's deepest character is marked by a primal grace and generosity. And since we are created in the image of God, when our character is marked by that same grace, we become joyful, contented people.

Life is not fair. Thank God! Life is rooted in the primal grace of God that transforms the world, especially us.

Amen.