

April 3, 2022

Texts: Isaiah 43: 16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14

Title: "When We Don't Know God"

In one of his books, writer Bruce Wilkinson brings up the story of the late Howard Hughes. He says that if there was one word that would describe Howard Hughes' ambition, it was the word *more*. "He wanted more money, he made millions. He wanted more fame, so he went to Hollywood and became a filmmaker and a star. He also designed, built, and piloted the fastest aircraft of his time. Hughes could dream of anything money could buy--and get it. He really seemed to believe that *more* would make him happy." But, of course, it didn't.

In Wilkinson's words, Hughes confused the pleasure of having *more for oneself* with the greater joy of giving oneself to something *bigger than oneself*. His dream failed him as it wasn't significant enough to bring meaning to his life."

And so, in his old age, Hughes became withdrawn, laying in his bed in a hotel penthouse in Las Vegas. He never left the room. He became addicted to drugs, emaciated and unkempt with decaying teeth and long, twisted fingernails. It was not a pretty picture.

Let me tell you about another man in search of *more*. His name was Saul. Does anybody remember him? Saul was super-religious--even to the point of persecuting early Christians. Do super-religious people ever persecute people who don't think as they think? You bet they do. Now Saul was a very religious guy but it would appear that something critical, was missing from his life.

But Saul's life took a new direction when he met Christ on the road to Damascus, but he also suddenly realized that all his religiosity meant nothing. Later he would write in our lesson for today, "...I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection..." (vs 8-10).

Saul's experience leads me to ask two important questions: first, *what's the difference between being "religious" and knowing God*. And secondly, *how can we know God in a deeper way?* Big questions, no doubt.

First, what's the difference between being "religious" and knowing God?

There's a difference between following the rules and rituals and having a connection to God that's transforming. Certainly, that's the experience of devout believers like Paul and many others down through the ages and people I've known and maybe people you've known. A lot of people have come to a point in their lives when they realized that their religious practice wasn't enough by itself nor was it meaningful. It wasn't making a difference in their lives.

As a young person, my church attendance, and the religious practice for a long time wasn't meaningful to me. My sister and I went to church every Sunday with my parents. I had years of Sunday school classes with wonderful teachers. But as a teenager, it just didn't do it for me. My mom, and then later, my dad, were both very committed church members. For my mom, her personal faith experience was

generally something she kept to herself. Sometimes she would shed a few tears as the pastor prayed in church, but I never understood what that was all about. The music was beautiful, but it wasn't really the kind of music I listened to at home. And the ministers were all nice people, but their sermons were just too far above my head; I didn't have a clue as to what they were talking about. And of course, when you're a teenager you really don't want to do what you're told to do if you don't see a reason to do it. And so finally I was released from the boredom of church to find my own spiritual way.

Some years went by, a lot of challenging stuff went down in my life, including the problems of alcohol and drug use. But through it there was this growing desire to know God. I really was moved by the message that through Christ we can find hope, healing, wisdom, purpose, and a desire to serve. And as this newfound spirituality developed in me, the church in all its worship and mission became a lot more meaningful to me for the first time!

When we are "religious," as I define it, we focus more on the surface stuff; the rituals and following the rules, some of us anyway, but sometimes we miss some of the inner reality of experiencing God the joy of "knowing" God and serving God.

So how can we come to know God in a deeper way? I wish I could just zap it into people. But here's a first step--just say "yes" to God. That's it. Wherever any of us are on our spiritual journey, that's all you need do. Faith is a gift given to those who ask. Paul is expressing the joy of having said "yes" to God when he writes, "I

regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...” What passion and purpose he gained as he moved from “religiosity” to Christ-like “spirituality!” Paul wants to be like Jesus, including his willingness to suffer like Jesus. And Paul did suffer willingly for his faith.

How can you and I come to know God today? Start by saying “yes.” I like the image of Christ knocking at the door of my heart. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him, and he with me.” (Rev 3:20).

Some of you remember the musical *Godspell*. In one scene the cast acts out the parable of the unforgiving servant from Matthew. It’s the one where a servant owes a huge debt but the master forgives the debt. But then this guy who was just been forgiven goes out and won’t forgive a much smaller debt owed him by his fellow servant (Mt 18:23-35).

After Jesus explains that his followers must forgive each other from their hearts, the cast sings a beautiful prayer that asks God for three things: “To see Christ more clearly, love Christ more dearly, follow Christ more nearly day by day.” Would you prayer kind of prayer?

Paul wrote, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...” May it be our expression and well. It’s the difference between knowing God and simply being “religious.” Amen.