

Knowing Jesus

“Knowing you, Jesus. Knowing you. There is no greater thing...”

This beautiful song by Graham Kendrick we just sang is based on today's Epistle lesson taken from Paul's letter to the Philippians: *“I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.”*

Paul gave up everything he had when he came to know Jesus.

And that raises two questions: 1) What exactly does it mean to “know Jesus,” and, 2) How can we come to know Jesus as Paul did?

We first encountered Jesus when we came to believe that He paid the penalty for our sins by dying on the cross.

And once we believed in him, He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and become our counselor.

One of the first things the Spirit taught us was to hate our sins.

And that motivated us to try as best we could to stop sinning.

And we were somewhat successful—we reduced the amount of sinning from what we had done before.

But there were a few sins we had the devil of a time getting rid of.

We could get rid of them for a while, but they would come back like a bad penny—and still do.

Now Jesus said that “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin” and that means that for all of our efforts to stop sinning, we are still slaves to sin.”

And part of the definition of a slave is that he can't free himself.

A galley slave can't free himself from his chains simply by rowing harder.

He may be able to avoid being punished by keeping up the pace, but he will remain a slave as long as he is chained to the oars.

So it is with us: we try as hard as we can to obey God's commands, but we remain chained to our sinful natures.

Sometimes we try to console ourselves by telling ourselves that other people sin more than we do.

The Commandment says, “You shall not commit murder” so we don’t—and that makes us better than murderers.

But then we get mad at someone and the Holy Spirit reminds us that to be angry with our neighbor is a form of murder in God’s eyes and calls down the same judgment as God’s judgment upon a murderer.

Another Commandment says, “You shall not commit adultery,” and so we stay faithful to our spouses.

But then Jesus says that even to entertain a lustful thought is a form of adultery.

So Harry vows to never again look at a woman lustfully, but when he arrives at work he is greeted by Vanna, the new receptionist, who wears a skirt cut up to here and a blouse cut down to there.

Harry remembers that Jesus said that anyone who looks upon a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart, so he tries to wipe that image out of his mind.

But the image keeps burning in Harry’s mind for the rest of the day.

Betty swears off gossiping forever.

Then she gets a call from her best friend who reports that Ella, a woman Betty doesn’t particularly like, is having problems in her marriage.

And does Betty ever want to know more about that!

It’s SOS—the same old sin, the thorn in our flesh that keeps stabbing our consciences day after day.

And even if Harry and Betty manage to control their outward actions—if Harry keeps his eyes off Vanna, and Betty keeps her mouth shut about Ella, the image of Vanna keeps popping up in Harry’s mind and Betty’s heart is secretly gladdened that Ella is having problems.

We can’t wash sin off with soap or purge it away with fire because sin is part and parcel of our nature.

Luther wrote in his *Preface to the Book of Romans*: “Granted that, in appearance and conduct, you observe the law, owing to your fear of punishment or hope of reward, yet you do nothing from free choice and out of love for the law, but unwillingly and under compulsion; were there no law, you would rather do something else....And how is it possible for God to take pleasure in works that spring from reluctant and hostile hearts?”

The human heart, the Psalmist says, is deceitful above all things and a man’s motives are deep waters.

We can’t make our hearts righteous so we all stand convicted under God’s judgment: “*There is no one righteous, not even one...All have turned away...there is no one who does good, not even one.*”

Our attempts to please God by leading sinless lives are all doomed to failure.

And that was part of God’s plan.

Paul wrote, “God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.”

He gave us commands He knew we couldn’t keep so that He could show us the full measure of His grace.

God delights in bestowing his mercy, his grace upon us when we repent of our sins.

And that mercy, that grace is not an abstract thing.

It came in the form of a person: Jesus Christ.

John wrote that God is love, and Jesus is the incarnation of that love.

When we enthrone Jesus as Lord of our life, we make love the purpose of our life.

But do we really “know” Jesus”—like we “know” a trusted friend?

I suspect the answer to this in many cases is “No.”

We know a lot ABOUT Jesus.

We know that He is the Son of God and that He paid the penalty for our sins on the cross.

We know that He rose from the dead and that He ascended into heaven.

We say those things in the creeds every Sunday.

We know a lot *about* Jesus, but is that the same as “knowing” Him?

And that brings us back to the question with which we began: “What does it mean to know Jesus.

Here we can let the Scriptures speak for themselves.

In the Hebrew language there are two words that mean “to know.”

One simply means to have knowledge of something, as in, “I know that Aurora is in Ohio.”

This is the sense in which we normally use the word “know.”

But there is another Hebrew verb which means “to know” and which refers to a very different kind of “knowing.”

It means *to have an intimate relationship with someone.*

In the *KJV of the Old Testament* we read, “Adam knew his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and bore a child, Cain.”

To “know” someone in this sense means to know them in heart and mind and body and soul.

I learned this in a rather embarrassing way.

When I had just gotten out of seminary and was serving as a vicar at Our Redeemer Lutheran in Solon, I signed up for a course in conversational Hebrew at the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies.

As part of our classes we were required to have simple conversations with other classmates in Hebrew.

In one of these conversations, the woman I was talking with told me that she had a grown daughter who lived in Chicago.

I told her I would like to know her daughter.

Unfortunately, I used the wrong “know” and the instructor's face turned white.

She explained to us what I had said meant and the woman promptly informed me that she didn't want me anywhere near her daughter.

I didn't make that mistake again.

I didn't learn much conversational Hebrew either.

In the *Old Testament*, the word that means “to know in an intimate and personal way” is the word that Yahweh, the God of heaven and earth, uses to describe His relationship with His people Israel.

Yahweh was a husband to Israel; HE “knew” Israel, His bride, as a man knows his wife.

He accompanied Israel wherever she went, protected her, fed her, cared for her, wept with her and rejoiced with her.

He walked with His bride.

And when Israel strayed from her marriage to Yahweh and started worshipping pagan gods He called it adultery because she was violating the sacred covenant he had made with her.

But He forgave Israel—His bride—time and time again because He loved her.

Now in the New Testament era, This love of God for His people comes through Jesus Christ to all those who have faith in Him.

Jesus is our bridegroom and the church is His bride.

Heaven as the wedding feast of the Lamb where we will be united with our Bridegroom forever.

In Jesus, God left behind the smoke and fire and thunder of Mount Sinai and entered this world to be joined together with his people in Holy Matrimony.

And that can make us a little uncomfortable.

We prefer a less intimate God, a majestic God rather than a loving husband, even if it was the loving husband who went to the cross to save us.

We think something like, "Thank you, Jesus, for doing what you did. Now please let me get back to worshipping God."

And in the process, we never get to *know* Jesus.

Jesus wants to get as close to us as we will allow Him to get.

He seeks us in every imaginable way.

He comes to us in worship as our divine servant.

He invites us to feast on His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith.

He promises to intercede with God the Father on our behalf.

He wants to share His incomparable power and His divine wisdom with us for the living of our lives.

He promises to live IN us if we will live IN Him.

And given all this, why in the world wouldn't we want to make knowing Jesus the highest priority of our lives?

The answer's simple.

Truly knowing Jesus like we know our own wife or husband means knowing Him in his suffering as well as knowing Him in his glory.

And we don't much like that idea.

The glory part is fine, but the suffering part—not so much.

We're afraid of suffering and we will do almost anything to avoid it.

And when it does come, we will do almost anything to alleviate it.

But Jesus' way is the way of the cross.

He's willing to accompany you on the way, but you have to want to accompany Him as well.

Paul says. "God's spirit has testified to our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, *if we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*"

Then he adds: "I do not consider the sufferings of the present age to compare with the glory that is to be revealed in us."

So when suffering comes—as it inevitably does—we can take either of two different attitudes toward it.

We can resent it and hate it and write it off as a painful waste of our time and our lives.

Or we can believe that Jesus is drawing us closer to Himself by allowing us to share His suffering.

And we can choose to believe that in that suffering, God is causing all things to work together for our good—as He has promised to do.

So count the cost and make your decision.

Jesus' way is the narrow way, the untrodden path, which is traveled only by those who have decided in their hearts to "seek FIRST HIS kingdom and HIS righteousness."

He has warned us that we will have troubles in this world, but he has also promised us that in Him we will overcome our troubles.

And that we cannot begin to imagine the glory he has prepared for those of us who know him.

Amen.

