

## KNOWING JESUS

*“Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you; there is no greater thing.”*

This beautiful song by Graham Kendrick which we just sang is based on words in one of today’s Epistle lessons 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. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in Him....”*

It’s a beautiful thought—but one that makes us Lutherans a little uncomfortable.

Words like grace and justification and faith are familiar to us, but when people start talking about having a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” or about “giving your heart to Jesus,” we tend to get a little uneasy.

Could it be that that kind of smaltzy language seems a little too feely-touchy for us?

It might be fine for Pentecostals and Baptists, but it’s just not our style. We like our religion hard and straight—not mushy.

Well, it wasn’t too mushy for Paul.

He wanted above all else to “know Christ Jesus my Lord” and “be found in Him,” and if that was important to Paul, maybe it would be worth our while to spend some time talking about what he meant by “knowing Jesus.”

Let’s start with the basics.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus says that “everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”

Sin is breaking God’s Law.

And assuming that everyone here has broken one of the Ten Commandments at one time or other, that means that everyone here is a slave to sin.

Now our instinctive response to this is to try to stop sinning.

But that doesn’t work.

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

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

And so it is with us: we try as hard as we can to obey God's commands, and we have some success, but we remain chained to our sinful natures.

The Commandment says "*Thou shall not commit murder*" so we don't commit murder.

It says "*Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy,*" so we're here today honoring the Sabbath.

We do our utmost to forge an obedient spirit out of our flesh and blood, and we hope that as we try harder, it will get easier—and to some extent it does.

But sooner or later we fail, and we do it time and again.

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.

That image burns in Harry's mind for the rest of the day.

Nancy swears off gossiping.

Then she gets a breathless call in the morning from her best friend who reports that Ella, a woman Nancy is not particularly fond of, is having problems in her marriage.

And does Betty ever want to know more about that!

And when she finds out all she can, does she ever want to share *that* information with a few friends.

It's SOS—the same old sin, that thorn in our flesh that keeps pricking our consciences.

And even if Harry and Nancy manage to control their outward actions—if Harry looks the other way when Vanna walks by, and Nancy keeps her

mouth shut about Ella, the image of Vanna keeps popping up in Harry's mind and Nancy is secretly pleased that Ella is having problems.

We just can't wash the sin off with soap or purge it away with fire because the sin is part and parcel of what we **are**.

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?"

Proverbs 20:5 says, "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters."

Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure."

We can't make our hearts righteous, and God searches our hearts 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 and assuage our guilt by striving to obey the Commandments are doomed from the start.

And that raises the question: Why did God give us the Commandments in the first place when he knew that we were incapable of obeying them?

Why did He say, "Thou shalt not covet," when He knew we had covetous hearts?

Why did he say, "Thou shall not bear false witness," when He knew that lies would be born in our hearts every day?

Why indeed.

God gave us commands we couldn't keep for two reasons.

The first reason is given by Paul in the *5<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Romans*: "The law was given so that sin would increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

God wanted sin to increase so that he might shower more and more of His grace upon His children.

Paul affirms this in the *11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Romans* when he says, "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all."

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

But there's another reason God gave us commands we couldn't keep.

In our 2nd Epistle lesson for today Paul writes: "...no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

Our inability to obey the Commandments reveals to us the depth of our sinfulness.

In Paul's words, the law acts as a teacher to show us how sinful we are.

By striving to obey God's Law and failing time after time, we become conscious of the fact that we are slaves to sin.

And a slave cannot set himself free; he needs an Emancipator, a Savior.

And God has provided that Emancipator, that Savior, in Jesus Christ, who atoned for our sins with His death and set us free.

As we trust Jesus and enthrone Him as Lord of our life, we are set free—not only from our sins of thought and word and deed, but from the power of Satan and from the fear of death.

We are justified—made righteous—through our faith in Jesus.

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

I suspect the answer to this in many cases is "Probably not."

We know a lot ABOUT Jesus.

We know that Jesus 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 know that one day He will return and take all who have believed in Him to be with Him in heaven.

We learned these things in confirmation class and we say them in the creeds every Sunday.

But is that really “knowing” Jesus?

If not, then what does it mean to “know” Him?

Here we can let the Scriptures speak for themselves.

In the Hebrew language—the language of the *Old Testament*—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 that means “to know” and it refers to an altogether different kind of “knowing.”

It means *to have a close relationship with someone*.

In the *King James* version of the *Old Testament*, we read, “Adam *knew* Eve and she conceived and bore a child.”

To “know” someone in this sense means to have the most intimate possible relationship with them.

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 Hebrew 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 “get to know her daughter.”

I used the wrong verb for “to know” and both the woman’s and the instructor’s faces turned white.

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 is used to describe God’s love for His people.

God betrothed Himself to Israel, calling her His bride and Himself her husband.

And when Israel was unfaithful to her Husband by worshipping other gods—pagan gods—God called it adultery.

And Israel did this again and again.

But God forgave her because He loved her.

In the *New Testament*, Jesus calls the church His bride and Himself, her bridegroom.

Heaven is called “the wedding feast of the Lamb,” when we will be united with our Bridegroom forever.

That is how much God loves us.

In Jesus, God left behind the smoke and fire and thunder of Mount Sinai and entered this world to make the church—**us**—his bride.

And that makes us uncomfortable.

We prefer a less intimate God, a Father who *justifies His children* rather than a Husband who loves His bride.

We think something like, “*Thank you, Jesus, for doing what you did. Now please let me get back to worshipping You rather than having an intimate relationship with you.*”

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 joins 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 carries our prayers to God and intercedes with Him on our behalf.

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

He wants to live IN us and for us to live IN Him.

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

I think a big part of it is that knowing Jesus means walking with Him down the path He walked for us—a path that leads to the cross.

It means knowing Him in his suffering as well as knowing Him in his glory.

And that scares us.

We want to be where Jesus is, but we don't want to follow him to get there.

We trust Him for what he did for us, but we're not sure we trust what He said about his yoke being easy and His burden being light.

And how can you get to know someone you don't trust completely?

The way of Jesus is the way of the cross.

He has invited you to accompany Him but you have to accept the invitation.

So count the cost and make your decision.

It may sound more like Billy Graham than a Lutheran pastor to speak of "making a decision" for Christ but that's exactly what we do every day.

Not as regards our salvation: we had nothing to do with that and we can add nothing to it other than our gratitude.

But we can and we do make daily decisions regarding whether or not we really want to get to KNOW Jesus in the way He would like us to know him.

To know him in His suffering, to know Him in his humiliation, to die with Him and to rise up with Him to new life.

His 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" and let God supply their other needs as He will.

It takes courage, but the joy it brings surpasses everything this world has to offer.

Amen.

