

Pat Conover: Three Ways to Know God

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Scripture: [Matthew 9:25-10:15](#).

Three Ways to Know God

Introduction

This is a sermon about theological fundamentals and I also think of it as an evangelical sermon. It is a sermon to invite you further into the Seekers Conversation which is one location of the Christian Conversation. For those of you who feel fully engaged in the Seekers Conversation I hope it will help you more fully appreciate what we have going among us.

Seekers has many gifted preachers and, this morning, I am particularly aware of following David Lloyd and Deborah Sokolove. I think the authority and power of our preachers lies in two things: the quality of the words and feelings they share and the ways we see their words grounded in our shared life. When David's punch line in his Palm Sunday sermon involved slaughtered children it had weight for me, not only because of a powerful delivery but because David has put his weight down about injured children. When Deborah talks about Jesus taking time with the outcasts I am affected not only because of the scholarship she brings to her preaching but because we know something of her own struggles through poverty and divorce.

Last Sunday was special to me in part because of David's prayer of confession and the interaction with David during the sharing. To preach in Seekers is an act of vulnerability,

whether the preacher likes it or not. David brought us a picture of his theological engagement around a classic Christian doctrine. This was important enough to him that he was willing to risk the reactions and stay with us for the next round of conversation. Since I've said a few things from this pulpit that were not well-received by everyone, I know this is not all pleasure.

I've been to churches where I've heard well-crafted sermons that initiated very little engagement. Some congregations just want to have their prejudices stroked. Others want entertainment. Others want a preacher who adds prestige. And there are far too many stories of preachers being fired for telling a truth the congregation was not willing to hear. At best, in too many churches, a well-crafted sermon feels like dropping a baseball into a bucket. OK. That was interesting. What's next. In Seekers, I feel like we are following Kate's metaphor and weaving our threads into a tapestry.

Connections

I want to return to a thread that I introduced in my sermon that considered the theological distortions of the author of the Gospel of John. I'm glad to be preaching in response to the Gospel of Matthew today, though the lectionary text shows us little about Jesus and more about Matthew's concern for the segment of the early church of which he was a part.

In the lectionary for last Sunday Jesus is pictured as waking up the daughter of the President of a synagogue. This week, in the 10th Chapter, Matthew has borrowed a section from the "Little Apocalypse" in Mark and we hear about Christians fearing being beaten in the synagogues. Matthew, like John, was very invested in showing how Jesus was the answer to Hebrew scripture. But Matthew's answers to this concern come out of the investment of Jesus in his human community, not in translating the action to some cosmic or metaphysical plane.

Matthew writes, "When he saw the crowd, he was moved by them because they were in trouble and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." This is a lot different than just being a magical lamb in a cosmic drama of atonement. Just as David and Deborah are preachers grounded in a community, so was Jesus.

I'm returning to the basic theological point of humility. I don't mean modesty in the sense of "I know I'm good but I'm not going to say it." I mean the humility of owning up to the limits of what one knows and how one knows it. Another way of saying it is that we know about life from the inside as we live it. The biggest problems with most Christian doctrines, including the doctrine of the trinity, is that they are framed as if they were truths from outside of our experience that ask for belief that sets aside the truth as we can know it. Most damaging, a lot of institutional Christendom has misstated the question of salvation as belief in something that doesn't make much sense and gives the payoff in a theorized life after death.

The Council of Nicea, when it considered the trinity, was working with a question Jesus didn't ask. And when you ask an ill-formed question none of the answers work. Arguments about the metaphysical nature of God assume that there is some kind of vantage point outside of the life we live. Such questions invite us to think like a god rather than as a creature. But if we reframe the question and ask, "How can we know something of God," some of the Nicean concerns become interesting again.

Three Ways of Knowing God

We have three ways of knowing something about God. Unfortunately, Christendom has often had a hard time holding onto all three ways of knowing at the same time. And for any individual, at any one knot in the thread of life, one way may seem far more valuable than the other two. One of the powerful potentials of community comes from the interaction of people

working most directly with different ways of knowing God, a potential that is facilitated by our open pulpit.

One

The theological way of knowing God is through reflection on the experience of the eternal in our lives. I'm talking about our experience of beauty, truth, justice, number, and especially love. Let me pick on the concept of number for a minute. Here are three fingers. The word three refers to a concept that can be transferred to three outs in a baseball game or three coins in a fountain. We know a lot about numbers, and our application of numbers to material existence have released great technical power for human beings. But "threeness" remains an eternal which we can touch but not control. Our education system helps us all to name "three" with a common sound so we can talk about it together and this enriches our communication. And so it is with beauty, truth and justice. This way of knowing God is essentially the path named in Hebrew Scripture as "I Am" and in historical Christendom as "God the Father."

Two

The practical way of knowing God is everyday faithful living within the unfolding stories we share. It seems to me, from my engagement of the new Jesus scholarship, that for Jesus the path of salvation was by engagement rather than by belief. His formula was not John 3:16, but something like, "Love God and love each other," or perhaps more simple yet, "Follow me." This is way of salvation that Jesus points us toward with the questions left hanging in the great parables. Who is my neighbor? Did the older brother of the Prodigal come home again? What is the pearl that is worth everything else?

In Seekers we engage this path by naming some commitments required for membership, by emphasizing "calling," and by claiming the importance of including and balancing personal

spiritual growth, self-giving ministry, and the up building of community.

In this path I am happy to say, "Jesus is my Christ." I am happy to be living my life out within the story he helped to refocus from Hebrew Scriptures. He put his weight down within the story even though it cost him his life. When I heard the call of Jesus, like the President's daughter, I was willing to wake up and engage life.

This second path is the path of living out, of embodying, of commitment, of confession, of stewardship, and of sacrificial love. It is the work of aligning my life with what really matters and the courage of following the path wherever it goes. And love is so much at the center, because, of all the eternal, love is intrinsically interactional and bonding. (At this point it is worth noting that other great religions get to this junction point and say "renouncement" rather than love.)

This second path is known in Hebrew scripture as loving the law, of sacrifice, and as identifying with the story of the chosen people. Jesus was a fork in the road and tells us we can't make a deal with God but just have to accept the unearned love and pass it on. Because love is so important for Jesus, we are reminded again of why salvation can't be only an individual matter. Love becomes manifest as we bond to others and that bonding can be so joyous and so messy. So once again I say that salvation cannot only be a matter of belief. It must also be a matter of hope, and recognition, and risk. And, because engagement gets messy, we also need community to hear our confessions and to hold us accountable.

Three

The third path has been historically identified with the Holy Spirit. I think it is the hardest of the paths for Seekers to hold. Too often, I think we want to pretend that the first and

second paths are sufficient. I'm talking about **ecstatic knowing**. I'm talking about wild erotic loving rather than the tamer agape loving of responsibility and self-giving. I'm talking about passion and not just charity. I'm talking about a whole bottle of costly oil, of more wine for the wedding party, of drying the feet of Jesus with my hair, of ripping loose from my family when it cannot understand, of taking off on an evangelists road with no money and no pack, of letting radical healing flow at the most shameful moments, of singing in a choir and shivering so hard my hair follicles hurt, of feeling so sad in my white-face clown that it was easy to stay in character, and of glorious sexual sharing when I can't remember where I stop and Trish begins.

You don't do anything with ecstasy. When you reflect about it, it is already over. Ecstasy is just what it is. I touched it with you a few sermons back when I talked about my felt anger at the injustices in East St. Louis and other places. I think my point then was that I want to know more about Seekers than whether it is right-oriented or politically correct. I want to know if you really care. I want more than a sense of gathering out of mutual respect. I want a sense of Seekers that is engaged, that is moving together. You have held me when I cried. You sang at my wedding. Let us risk wildly together.

Summary

A Trinitarian understanding is important because the three ways of knowing God correct and enrich each other. Reflective distance creates a safe space for ecstatic sharing. Ecstasy lets loose an energy that makes self-giving more than duty. Making it real in everyday life saves us from head trips and manipulative formulas.

Matthew writes about Jesus. "When he saw the crowd, he was moved by them because they were in trouble and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Then Matthew goes on to place a

calling to evangelism in the mouth of Jesus. "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Although the crop is good, still there are few to harvest it. So beg the harvest boss to dispatch workers to the fields.'" Whether Jesus said words like this or not, we know that Jesus went to the field. We are the field. First path. We are the workers. Second path. We can meet Jesus and each other in the field. Third path.

Sing your praise.