

Text: Philippians 3: 4-14
Title: Beyond Knowledge, Beyond Practice
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Roger Allen Nelson

Dear Friends,

For as long as I can remember I have wrestled with, and wondered about, and tried to walk with God. For as long as I can remember I have wanted more of God. Fifty years of struggling, searching, and seeking. Fifty years of striving for, striving against, and striving with God. It is all I've ever known.

You want credentials?

I was born into a Christian home in the Christian middle of a "Christian" nation. I am the son of a father who was a thoughtful, pure, humble disciple of Christ. I went to church and Sunday school and catechism and youth group. I went to summer camps and winter retreats. I went to two fine Christian liberal arts colleges and a rigorous and respected seminary. I have a Masters of Divinity. I did post masters work at one of the most selective and storied campuses in America. I have read more words and heard more talk about God than.....

I suppose that sounds like boasting; it's not. But, if others think they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more.

I have wanted after God from the quilted green fields of Iowa, to a refugee camp in Hong Kong, to the south side streets of Chicago, to the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, to the parched hills of Israel. I have wrestled with God in classrooms and church pews, on bar stools and a therapist's couch. I've been a teacher and a preacher. I have wanted after God on paper, and in profound tragedy, and at every step of the way. I have wanted after God....

Maybe you have too?

For as long as I can remember I have wrestled with, wondered about, and tried to walk with God. But, whatever were gains for me, I consider loss for the sake of knowing Christ. Whatever seemed like it was a benefit, whatever seems like boasting, I would give up that I might know Christ....

Maybe you would too?

Now, I am not sure that works as way into this passage. It is not a perfect fit. My journey with God has always been through the people and person of Christ, and Paul is writing after being struck down on the road to Damascus. Paul had a BC life and an AC life: before Christ and after Christ. In this text he is comparing his experience as a Pharisee persecuting Christ over against his life in Christ.

Paul lived in a culture that measured life by progeny, position, and performance. And, by those markers, Paul had the best hand.

He was born of the right breeding – from the best line of the best family.
He was rigorous in intellect and intention – a graduate of the best schools.
He had all the right equipment – the equipment of flesh and faith.
He was purpose driven and passionate and productive.
Within an economy of merit he was a made-man.
But, he writes that it was all excrement.

Our translation cleans up the language and uses the word “garbage” so as not to offend our Sunday-go-to-meetin’ sensibilities.

Employing accounting language, Paul adds up his side of the ledger, and the very things he counted as gain now seem as loss. The very things that he thought mattered are now abhorrent. He stacks up his credentials and says it doesn’t amount to squat ~ except knowing Christ.

I am not sure that my way into this passage worked, but my guess is that there was some resonance. My guess is that many of you could recount similar journeys. In fact, if it’s a matter of putting our Christian credentials on the table many of you would trump me.

But, my guess is that many of you can also recount a similar longing for God. Even given all that you have done and all that you are doing, you still long for and want to know Christ ~ deeper, fuller, and more intimately. Given all of your credentials you still want to know Christ not just through the witness of others, or the stories of scripture, or the beauty of traditions, but you want to know Christ through an unmistakable, unshakable, and undeniable relationship.

Dear friends, in that longing to know Christ we would be in good company ~ we would be in the company of Paul. For what is amazing in this morning’s text, and what I think is instructive, is Paul’s proclamation:

I want to know Christ ~ yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participate in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

This is after the fact. This is after his conversion, this is after years of honing and hammering out a theology, this is after planting churches and writing letters and preaching, this is after wrestling with, wondering about, and walking with Christ. Some scholars think this could be 30 years after his encounter on the Damascus Road. And! And, after all of that he still wants “to know Christ.”

I don’t think the point is that he weary and bored and.... Oh, what a surprise, he still wants to know Christ! I think the point is that he still longs to know Christ ~ because he doesn’t know enough,

because there is something incomplete,

because there is something not fully satisfying,

because there is something almost tentative....

Clearly he is not talking about knowing Christ as a matter of more knowledge. This is not about having a better handle on the measurements or meaning of Christ. This is not about the nuanced implications of a Christology. The word here for “knowing” is multi-layered, but it harkens back to knowing as intimacy, as belonging, as love making, as relational.

I want to know Christ. Maybe you do too?

But, maybe in this broken world there is always an incompleteness or a sense of longing.

Maybe the best we can do is join Paul and Bono:

*I believe in the kingdom come
then all the colors will bleed into one, bleed into one
Well yes, I'm still running
You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains
Carried the cross of my shame, of my shame
You know I believed it
But, I still haven't found what I'm looking for
But, I still haven't found what I'm looking for*

Now, I am not suggesting that Paul is looking beyond Christ for something else, but there is, even for Paul, a desire to know more and more and more and more of Christ. There is an implicit recognition ~ even as one who has gained Christ and been found in Christ ~ of incompleteness.

As that is true, one response is to drag out a variety of action metaphors. Therefore, dig deeper, try harder, run stronger, and keep pressing toward the goal to win the prize. In this light knowing Christ is a function of discipline. We are encouraged to engage in those practices that help us know Christ better. Faith is not just a matter of intellectual assent, or a deep seated trust, but it is also embodied practice. One theologian puts it this way:

One gains such experiential knowledge by wide-awake attendance at public worship and proper use of the sacraments; by showing kindness to all, practicing the forgiving spirit, above all love; by learning to be thankful; by studying the Word of Christ both devotionally and exegetically so that it dwells in the heart, by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to the glory of God, and continuing steadfastly in prayer...blah, blah, blah...

Whew! I am exhausted....

Knowing Christ is a matter of what we do. (?)

But, isn't there a mystery or some tension that even as those are the conduits that we've been given to know Christ ~ Christ is not in those practices. Christ is not contained by what we do. Christ is not in those things. Knowing Christ is beyond knowledge and beyond practice. Christ is somehow, someway outside of and beyond whatever we do. Scripture, sacrament, prayer, singing, liturgy, community ~ they are all pointers toward Christ, they are all revealers of Christ, but Christ does not reside in them.

Can we know Christ as wholly other?

Can we know Christ outside of those conduits?

Paul writes that knowing Christ has to do with participating in his sufferings, and being united in his death ~ and somehow, somehow being resurrected with him. To that end maybe we know Christ when we're broken,
when we're abandoned,
when we've got nothing left,
when we're dead.
When we've let go of everything that we do ~ then Christ.

William Willimon gets at it like this:

We're always in danger of reducing Christianity to a matter of our experience. The true God can never be known through our practices but comes to us only as a gift of God, only as revelation. This is why I can say that Christian practices are not primarily what we do. Rather, our practice of the faith is something that God does for us, in us, often despite us.

Today's talk about spiritual practices could be just one more in a long line of attempts to take time on our terms. Thank God we don't have to devise a set of practices to take time for God; in Jesus Christ, God takes us.

A Lenten spirituality might hold together nicely:

No one gets out of here alive. Remember you are dust (Ash Wednesday).

But, you are called by God in Christ (Lent One)

and one day God will come and put this world to rights (Lent Two).

Our journey toward that *shalom* is full of dangers, toils, and snares, but we are given strength for the journey. So, don't be afraid, we will endure for God's strength is greater than any weakness (Lent Three).

And, as all of that is true, than the way that we see creation is changed. It is reframed. It is new creation (Lent Four).

But, all of that superfluous without knowing Christ.

What matters is to know Christ.

What sustains is to know Christ.

What I long for, what I wrestle with, what I pray for is to know Christ.

What I pray for you is that you might know God in Christ ~ deeper, fuller, and more intimately.

Maybe we can't make it happen, and on this side of the river there will always be a sense of restlessness and incompleteness, and may you know Christ through these gifts (communion), but also...

when you are broken,

when you are empty,

when you are dead

may you know Christ in the power of the resurrection.

Even so come Lord Jesus.

Amen.