

Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

Tell us plainly. While Jesus was walking around the Temple, the Jews asked him, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." We cannot talk plainly about God for God is complex. We cannot know everything about God. The Christian faith is not knowing; it is a relationship with our Lord.

With that said, we do want to know all we can about God and God's world. We believe that God gave us our minds. Presbyterians have always believed in and supported education. Presbyterians believed that their pastors were to be educated. When the frontier was being won, some denominations felt it was important to send out their pastors immediately while Presbyterians determined that we would not send pastors until we educated our pastors. That put us behind in settling the frontier as Presbyterians. Bible studies and issue studies help us grow in our knowledge of God.

Knowledge is great. And yet we divide ourselves by our knowledge, about what we think we know about God. For centuries, orthodox doctrine was important. That is, to be a Christian one had to believe the right things, assent to certain teachings and belief that were held by the church. And yet doctrine has been a source of division. Two men were having a conversation when they discovered they both were Christians. The one asked the other, "Do you believe in the second coming of Christ?" "Why yes," the other man replied. "Me too! Do you believe in the rapture?" "Yes." "Me too! Do you believe in the tribulation?" "Yes!" You could tell by the tone of their voices that they were very excited about meeting each other. Finally, the one asked, "Do you believe in the pre-tribulation rapture or the post-tribulation rapture?" "Post-tribulation."

"Heretic!"

In medieval times, church theologians would argue about how many angels can dance on the point of a needle. “How many angels can dance on the head of a needle” has become a metaphor for wasting time debating topics of no practical value, or questions whose answers hold no intellectual consequence, while more urgent concerns pile up.

Divisions are made based on our beliefs about God. You probably have heard of people who are referred to as “fundamentalist.” You may not be aware of the history of that word. The movement started in the late Nineteenth Century into the early Twentieth Century. Fundamentalists proclaim that there are certain fundamentals of the faith that one has to believe to be a Christian. If one did not believe in these fundamentals, one could not be a Christian. The movement was started by conservative Presbyterian theologians at Princeton Seminary! In the early Twentieth Century the Presbyterian Church did demand that pastors had to adhere to certain fundamentals. Those fundamentals were later removed and Presbyterians have been hesitant to require fundamentals of belief.

Yet, we still divide ourselves by our beliefs about God. Some know that God does not call women to be pastors or leaders in the church. Other churches know that God does. Churches divide themselves on their understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Some believe that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ, others believe it is simply symbolic. Some know that God does not call gay people to be pastors. Others know God includes gay people in God’s church. Whenever I hear anyone declare they know God’s will with absolute certainty, it makes me a bit nervous. We cannot talk plainly about God for God is complex. God is immortal; we are mortal.

God is omnipotent; we are limited. We simply cannot grasp everything there is to know about God. As someone once said, "God grasps us; we do not grasp God."

That is not to say that we no longer require any kind of belief. Concerning membership in the church, our *Book of Order*, the constitution of the Presbyterian church, states:

A congregation shall welcome all persons who trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the fellowship and ministry of his Church. No person shall be denied membership for any reason not related to profession of faith. The Gospel leads members to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the Gospel.

The one requirement for membership in the Presbyterian Church is a profession of our one central belief, Jesus Christ is Lord.

Jesus Christ as Lord suggests that it is a relationship, not knowing things about God. Here in our gospel reading Jesus gives us a powerful metaphor for that relationship, a shepherd. He proclaimed: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." I've been told that sometimes different shepherds would overnight their flocks in a sheep fold with other sheep. In the morning, each shepherd would call for their sheep. The sheep of that shepherd, and only the sheep of that shepherd, would then follow the shepherd out of the fold. The sheep know the voice of their shepherd. That suggests a close relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. Jesus is the Word of God. It is knowing about God through our relationship with Jesus Christ. We know God through Jesus and thus it is our experience with Jesus. This is clear in this analogy of sheep and shepherd. There is a significant difference between knowing about Jesus and having an experience of Jesus, a relationship with Jesus.

The Jesuit priest Anthony DeMello told a parable he entitled "The Explorer," which illustrates our predicament. In it, a person leaves his home village to explore the faraway and exotic Amazon. When he returns to his village, the villagers are captivated as the explorer tries to describe his many experiences, along with the incredible beauty of the place, with its thundering waterfalls, beautiful foliage, and extraordinary wildlife. How can he put into words, though, the feelings that flooded his heart when he heard the night sounds of the forest or sensed the dangers of the rapids? So he tells them they simply must go to the Amazon themselves. To help them with their journey, the explorer draws a map. Immediately the villagers pounce on the map. They copy the map, so that everyone can have his or her own copy. They frame the map for their town hall and their homes. Regularly they study the map and discuss it often, until the villagers consider themselves experts on the Amazon—for do they not know the location of every waterfall and rapids, every turn and bend? They may know everything about the Amazon, but they have never experienced the Amazon. Faith is more about experiencing God, not knowing about God.

An old man and a young man were on the same platform before a vast audience. A special program was being presented. As part of the program, each was to repeat from memory the words of the 23rd Psalm. The young man, trained in the best speech techniques and drama, gave, in the language of the silver-tongued orator, the words of the Psalm: "The Lord is my Shepherd" When he had finished, the audience clapped their hands and cheered. Then the old gentleman, leaning heavily on his cane, stepped to the front of the same platform and in feeble, shaking voice repeated the same words: "The Lord is my Shepherd" But when he was seated, no sound came from the

listeners. Folks seemed to pray. In the silence, the young man stood to make the following statement: "Friends," he said, "I wish to make one explanation. You asked me to recite the Psalm. But you remained silent when my friend here was seated. The difference? I shall tell you. I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."

We experience God by worshiping in a community of faith, reading and studying Scripture, praying, and serving God in the church and in service to others.

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might be to our God
forever and ever. Amen.