KNOWING GOD
Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21

FOCUS: To know God is to allow God to love us and to love others in response.

What do you know? I actually know a lot of stuff, some important, some rather useless. I know that there is a mountain in Tibet that is called Everest. I know that it is the tallest mountain in the world, although there are some mountains under the ocean which are taller. I now know that Everest is 29,028 feet high. Sadly, this week we have all come to know of the tragic deaths of mountaineers on Everest and of thousands of residents of neighboring Nepal in that devastating earthquake. But I have never measured Everest, nor have I measured all the other mountains in the world to be certain Everest is indeed the tallest. I have not even been to Tibet. Yet I am confident that my facts are correct, that I indeed know about that distant mountain, that I know there has been a terrible loss of life in the region this week.

How do I know? I know about the mountain’s status and height because I looked it up. After all if you read it on the internet you know it is true. And I know that there has been a terrible tragedy in Nepal because I read about it in the newspaper and watched stories about it on television. But I have not empirically verified those facts. I have not measured, I have not seen and touched the devastation. But I know it to be real and I know the mountain is the tallest. I know because others have verified the mountain’s height, others have walked the devastated street and have shared their findings.

Not everything I know is the product of hands on, empirical verification. Some things I do know from such, like I know that if a car fails to yield the right of way and runs a red light while I am legally in the intersection there will be a collision. I experienced that some years ago in Montgomery. And I know that if I don’t pay attention and touch both posts on an adding machine cord which is still partially connected to the wall plug I will get shocked. I did that years ago when I worked for the bank in Birmingham, and I still remember that truth! But other things I know just as certainly because they have been verified by reliable sources and have stood the test of time, like the fact that Everest is indeed the tallest mountain and that there has been a tragic earthquake.

Then there are those things that I know but cannot really explain how or why I know them. It is those things which we gather here each Sunday to explore, to celebrate and to embrace. They are matters of that mystical thing we call faith. In his letter to the Hebrews Paul spoke of this strange kind of knowledge. In the NRSV we read, ***“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*** I also like the NIV translation which reads, ***“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”***

In one of his daily devotionals this week Richard Rohr was reflecting on the way the church drifted away from its mystical roots only a couple of centuries after it was founded by those who called it The Way, those who shared everything without reservation, who cared for each other, those who suffered the oppression of being a distrusted and often abused minority. He lamented the fact that in Europe the church became, not the refuge for the least, the last and the lost, but the purview of the powerful, the wealthy, the privileged.

Rohr attributed the transition, at least in part, to the abandonment of mysticism in favor of a religion which increasingly demanded a definitive answer for everything. He bemoans the fact that such is still the case in many Christian circles today as he writes, ***“It is amazing how religion has turned this biblical idea of faith around to mean the exact opposite: into a need and even a perceived right to certain knowledge, complete predictability, and perfect assurance about what and whom God likes and what and whom God does not like. It seems we think we can have the Infinite Mystery of God in our quite finite pocket.”***

This morning I want us to put aside the quest for clear, easy answers to deep, even elusive questions. I want us to hear the call to know some of those things that come only as we embrace the holy mystery which surrounds that infinite God. I want us to explore the question, “How do we know God?” How would you answer that question? I am going to give you a moment to think about that. Sit quietly, put aside any fear that you might get it wrong, and be honest with yourself. You might even discover that you have no clear answer and that is OK as well.

I asked folks to offer their answers over the last few days. Here are some of the responses I got. Someone wrote, ***“My earliest memory was talking to God, in a childlike way. He has always been present, even when I impulsively mess up, I hear him reminding me that I can do better. Even though I'm grown up, I’m still that child.”*** Another response reflects a much different experience. ***“I'm not sure there is a God. The God that I thought I knew was a God of wrath and judgment. I never knew a God of love, just a God that watched, judged, and punished. My relationship was one of fear, not love. I hope this helps. Peace out.”*** One response reflects a bit of mysticism. ***“Knowing God is an internal feeling - not easy to verbalize or describe. One way I know God and know that He is present in my life is in looking back. Things that at the time were confusing or stressful or disappointing are now blessings and proof to me that God is present in my life and working His plan.*** Then there was this thoughtful response, ***“You Know God through His Word. You Know God through His Works. You Know God through Jesus Christ. You Know God through Prayer. You Know God through the Spirit. You Know God through the Love of One Another.”***

How do you know God? A simple question, no easy answers. Yet I would tell you that there is found in this morning’s text a common thread, it is the thread which was, unfortunately, missing in the experience of that second respondent. It is a thread which I find to be missing in much of what the church seems to be preaching these days. How do you know God? John lays it out, plain and simple, in verse 7. ***“Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”***  So there you have it. The way to know God is to love. John then warns, ***“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”***

I read these words this week in a meditation which reflected on the lives of the desert fathers and mothers who lived communal lives cut off from much of the rest of the world. They resonate with the scripture we are pondering this morning. ***“The desert tradition preceded the emergence of systematic theology and the formalization of doctrine. Faith was first a lifestyle before it was a belief system.”*** Faith in its purest form is a lifestyle, not a bunch of rules, not a collection of political and social statements. It is about knowing God and about being known by God and both halves of that equation are bound up in love. Faith is about active love, love freely dispensed by God, poured out without reservation on us all. And faith is about active love passed on to all of God’s children by we who claim the name of Christ.

God’s love is the love of grace. And it is the defining characteristic of our God. Indeed John says in verse 16 that God is love. Ours is not the God of judgement, of fear, of punishment. Ours is not the God who is out to get us, who delights when we miss the mark. Ours is the God who, like the prodigal’s father, despairs when we wander, when we make foolish choices, when we are unloving. And ours is the God who is forever ready, ever longing, to welcome us home with loving arms if we will but run or walk or crawl back to God.

That is not to say that we will be freed from consequences when we do stupid, foolish or evil things. Indeed our actions always carry consequences. But consequences are not punishments. Consequences are simply the result of actions, ours others. God allows them to happen, but that does not mean that God tosses them out randomly or that God has a direct hand in them. And God’s heart breaks along with us when we suffer. God offers us free will. It is that free will which makes life worth living, but free will must be open to wrong decisions and foolish actions or it is not free will.

I feel compelled to wander for a moment here lest I ignore the proverbial elephant in the room when it comes to the whole issue of suffering, free will and God’s hand in this world. I cannot fathom the scope of the tragedy I mentioned earlier in Nepal and the surrounding countries. The death toll is staggering and keeps climbing. So we encounter the question which always comes up in times like this, one for which I have no definitive answer. Where is God in all of this? While I cannot adequately answer that question, I am certain that we err if we claim, as have some misguided preachers in the past, that God does this kind of stuff to punish people. That is not the way of love, and God is love. Still, I don’t have an answer and I will just have to be OK with that.

One of my fellow pastor friends, Jack Kale posted words concerning how to grieve with those who are suffering which are filled with wisdom. ***“I want to encourage you to consider taking the advice that Saint Paul offered to the early church. He said, “Don’t grieve like people with no hope.” (I Thess 4:13) We all grieve, but we don’t all have hope. Hope reminds us that suffering isn’t the end of the story. Hope proclaims that there is a new day coming. Hope challenges despair and champions the future. Hope breaks the chains of despondency and depression. Hope promises that earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes are not the end of the story. Hope delivers assurance that cancer, divorce, addiction, and war don’t have the last word. This week, take time to reflect not just on your hurts, but also your hopes. Don’t give up. Keep your chin up. Take time to grieve. Don’t rush, but don’t stay there too long either. There will be plenty of non-profit opportunities to help the people of Nepal. Find one and make a difference. In the meantime, take hope and know that tomorrow is coming!***

God is love, and because God is love, because of the promise that by God’s grace and abiding love we have of salvation through Christ, we have hope even when things look hopeless. And because we have hope it is our task to offer love and hope to others. That is what love is all about. It is not easy to love others, especially those others we would prefer to avoid. And if we are honest we really don’t want to offer hope to those we just don’t like. But that is our task, that is our calling, that is the way we acknowledge that we know God.

We cannot do it on our own and God knows that. That is why God sent the Spirit of Christ to be with us in the here and now. John repeats several times over in the scripture we have read today the notion of abiding in God and allowing God to abide in us. That is the key, that is the only way to make sense of all the twists and turns of this old life. How do I know it works? It is not something I have proven empirically, it is not something I know because a trusted source told me it is true, though over the years many trusted sources have testified to its truth. It is one of those mystical faith things. Like one of you, I can’t fully put it into words. But I know it is true. When I abide in God and allow God to abide in me, and I don’t do either as faithfully as I ought, I find that I truly know God and I hear clearly the call to respond to that knowledge by loving others.

Have you noticed that as we come together here today, the message sounds eerily familiar? As I worked on this sermon and pondered the various scriptures I couldn’t help but think about how similar the focus is to that of last week’s message which explored the difference between that which is simple and that which is easy. The conclusion was that John expressed in the simplest of terms what it means to be Christian, to believe in Jesus and to love one another. But we also recognized that living fully into those truths was anything but easy. We covered that believe and love stuff last week, so why go there again?

In one of our recent prayer gatherings I shared an anonymous quote which I think is a good reminder of why we need to keep repeating simple, important and challenging messages about what it means to be followers of Jesus. ***“You look, but you don’t see. You hear but you don’t listen. You touch but you don’t feel. You like me but you don’t love me.”*** I know that I am certainly guilty. I am often distracted, often forgetful often less than truly loving. I confess that there are times in my life when I really like Jesus, but fail to love him.

We are not particularly adept at abiding. That is why it is important to return frequently to these foundational concepts of the faith. God calls us to periodically take stock of our spiritual landscape. God pleads with us to slow down. God calls us to see, to listen, to feel and to love. And as we hear and answer the call we may just find time to reset our compasses and thus to insure that we are headed in the right direction.

How do we come to know God? We have heard some pretty good answers offered by some of you and by others. But in the end we are drawn by all of them back to the simple yet challenging notion that it is only those who love who can truly know God, for God is love. God proved his love by offering his son as a beacon of hope to all who would but open their eyes, their hearts and their spirits. We are called to open ourselves up to the freely offered gift of God’s amazing love and then in response we are called to love unconditionally, not just those who are like us, not just those we like, but all God’s children. And everyone is a child of God, even your worst enemy.

In a moment we will share in the sacrament of Holy Communion. In a very real way this sacred rite, instituted by our Lord, is the perfect symbol of God abiding in us and of the responsibility which is ours to abide in by God. We are called to ponder the wonder of all Jesus has done for us as we take within the juice and bread, symbols of the broken body and shed blood of Christ. As the elements are consumed and digested they literally become a part of who we are. Having eaten, we are called to allow the very Spirit of God to invade our spirits and to affect who we are and how we live.

How do we know God? We know God as we open ourselves to God’s love and as we love in response. For your sake, for the sake of a world filled with those starving for real love and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who is love, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.