

## **Sermon by Ken Rockwell, August 11, 2019: Knowledge, Faith, and Mystery**

[Note: Actual sermon varies a bit in minor points from this “script”—but this conveys the idea]

Well, here I am giving another sermon. During this period of transition, we Deacons needed to arrange for the pulpit to be filled, and I volunteered again. It can remind you of the story of Isaiah: “Here am I, Lord—send me!”

In truth, I relate more to Moses when he first got the call: “What, me? I’m a lousy speaker!” But the Lord accommodated him, letting him use his brother Aaron as a mouthpiece for a while. Somehow Moses grew into the job. There’s a story of hope...

Last time, I mentioned my problems with doubt. It goes back a long time, I’d say to college.

Learning so much about so many different ways of seeing the world, I came to realize how little I knew. How to sort it all out? Among other things, I learned of Socrates, who considered his only claim to wisdom is realizing how little he knew. By that measure, I should be in great shape!

At the age of 20, when you’re supposed to know everything, here I was feeling the opposite, and not liking it at all! So that probably contributed to my joining a tradition that had plenty of answers. It was a comfort for a time, but the questions kept coming.

Fast forward to a new stage in my life, when I found grace here at FCC, and faith in the God of Grace who understands our limitations and welcomes us to grow in faith at our own pace. We might put it like this: A Christian isn’t someone who has reached the end of the journey, but one who has agreed to start out on it.

Besides the image of Thomas being accepted as a disciple of Jesus, I find other occasions for hope in the scriptures. The Bible is full of all sorts of people struggling with faith. Often the pattern is: God calls, one has doubts, attempts to respond and follow God’s lead, and fails. And then gets back up and tries again. That’s the repeated pattern of the Israelites over and over.

I’ve become more comfortable with not having all the answers. More comfortable with Mystery.

Really, what DO we know? We may be experts in one area, our specialty, but there’s still plenty to learn even in that field, not to mention many others.

So try pondering the nature of... the Almighty Creator!

When we say we “know God,” we mean we’ve come to an understanding of what God must be like, and have faith in that understanding. We may have received some confirmation that we’re on the right track. But we’ve hardly scratched the surface. In this mortal world, we’re severely limited in our understanding. St. Paul wrote of our condition, how we see only dimly as in a mirror. By using the example of the mirror, he may have been commenting on our tendency to see what we’re familiar with. We make God in our own image, as it were.

O GOD! Let me see You! Many a believer has made this plea. Moses asked to see the Lord’s glory, but God said “you cannot see My face and live.” (Ex 33:20)

The disciples asked this of Jesus, “Show us the Father!” That’s in John’s Gospel—the same book that says early on, “No man has seen the Father.” This is one of those things of which Jesus had said, “You cannot bear it now.” Seeing Jesus is the best we’re going to do, as He demonstrates the graceful ways of God and speaks God’s truths and wisdom. And remember the disciples’ experience of the Transfiguration—they could barely stand the brilliance.

Similar stories are told in other traditions. In the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu holy book, Krishna gives his disciple Arjuna a vision of his true self in all his glory as Creator of the Universe. Again, Arjuna can’t bear it, and begs Krishna to return to his familiar form.

And in the writings of the Baha’i Faith, the Prophet speaks in the divine voice: “You shall be hindered from loving me, and souls shall be perturbed as they make mention of Me, for minds cannot grasp me, nor hearts contain me.”

Why is God hidden from us? Christian philosophers and theologians suggest that it may be a blessing that we don’t encounter God on a daily basis. Perhaps there are benefits – particularly our free will, which includes the freedom to make mistakes, to come to our own conclusions, rather than having the truth so obvious that we are practically compelled to believe. Maybe the benefits come from growth that comes from the struggle to understand, such as the ability to trust. Maybe there are benefits to this hiddenness that we can’t understand in this life. I don’t know—at times it would be nice to have more certainty!

Still, we’re given some encouragement even when we feel we don’t have much faith.

Consider the man who begged Jesus to heal his son (Mk 9).

“Lord, I believe—Help thou my unbelief!” Surely one of the most sincere prayers ever said. The man knew his own limits. And it’s clear that Jesus accepted him and helped him.

So we need not despair at our lack of knowledge. God understands! God has given us just so much as we can understand, and we may not have the answers to all of our questions. Our knowledge of God may be tiny—like a mustard seed! But according to Jesus, that may be just enough faith.

Or to use a parable from Northern California, where I’m from: In the northwest woods, the smallest cone among all the evergreen trees is the one that grows into the mightiest tree of them all: the Redwood.

When I visit the redwood groves, I feel I’m in a natural cathedral, and I remember the greatness of God. Or look out at the stars of the Milky Way and consider the vastness of space, then the One who created it all.

I like to imagine the Psalmist looking out at those stars as he spoke these words: “What is a man, that Thou art mindful of him!”

To ponder the greatness of God, the proper response should include humility. One of the three essentials of faith, according to the prophet Micah: to walk humbly with God.

And when we have the proper perspective of humility before God, we may be more understanding of others in their own search for God's way. It's best not get so arrogant about whether our faith is better than other people's. We are all in the same boat, trying to make our way in an uncertain and ambiguous world. It is our faith, not clear-cut knowledge, that will see us and others through. The God of Grace understands our plight, and knows others' hearts and circumstances better than we possibly can.

This church has always emphasized this understanding of God. There are plenty of churches that are happy to tell you exactly what to believe, and how wrong you are if you disagree. We have something special here, more accepting of where people are on their journey. So let's keep going, providing a light that shines in the darkness of doubt. A light of grace rather than judgment.

BENEDICTION (based on Psalm 139:7-12)

As we leave this place, let's not forget:  
There is no where we can go where God is not.  
Everywhere we go, God goes before us.  
From the farthest ocean to the highest mountain,  
from the heights of joy to the depths of despair—  
wherever we find ourselves, God is already there.  
So go in peace,  
for we do not go alone.