

“What Do We Know?”

1 John 5:1-6

On this Mother’s Day, do we know what our children are doing? When we read or listen to the news, do we know what’s real and what’s not? When Oprah interviewed Harry and Meghan, do we know what it’s like to be born into or marry into English royalty? Do we know how to survive a divorce or an addiction or depression? Do we know how to believe in and follow Jesus Christ?

One of the principal themes in both the first letter of John and John’s gospel is the vexing dilemma of *how to “know” something*. How is knowledge acquired? How can we be certain that we know what we know?

This issue lurks in today’s reading, and John even mentions it specifically: “By this we *know* that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments”. In 1 John, the theme is pervasive; in this short letter, the word “know” or “knowledge” appears 38 times, of which the following are representative:

- 2:4 - Whoever says, “I have come to *know* him,” but does not obey his commandments, is a liar.
- 3:14 - We *know* that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.
- 3:19 - And by this we will *know* that we are from the truth.
- 3:24 - And by this we *know* that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.
- 4:2-3 - By this you *know* the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.

- 4:8 - Whoever does not love does not *know* God, for God is love.
- 4:13 - By this we *know* that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And, as though to emphasize his point, John closes his letter by reviewing his theme and purpose: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may *know* that you have eternal life”.

This verse recalls John’s thesis in his gospel, explicitly identified in 20:30-31: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Most people wrestle with achieving certainty. We may utter what we *believe* to be the truth, but it is often with quivering lips and a doubtful heart. How does one acquire the kind of knowledge that allows for no shade of doubt or uncertainty?

Absolute certainty is probably not possible, for as we know, there are only two things of which we can be absolutely certain: taxes and death.

When asked how one can know anything, most people — after some stuttering — will blurt out something about the five senses. Yes, we learn and know through *sense perception*, although try telling that to the five blind men describing an elephant.

What’s another way we can know? Through *reason*. We might not be sure that the fowl crossing the road is a duck, but then we apply reason to our uncertainty. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, has webbed feet like a duck, has feathers like a duck and hangs out with other ducks, it’s a duck.

Emotion and language are other ways we humans learn and know.

Four additional ways of knowing: *intuition, imagination, faith, and memory*.

The biggie here for Christians, of course, is faith. It's like a sixth sense. Sometimes, we absolutely, positively know something is true, although we have no empirical evidence for it. But for the writer of Hebrews, faith is all the evidence we need! "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, KJV).

Critics sometimes laugh at faith as a means of acquiring knowledge. Faith will fail you; they say. What you believe is true often turns out to be a sham. Faith can be unreliable.

But so, can all the senses. Just ask defense attorneys about eyewitness testimony. And why is it that sometimes when we apply reason to a problem, the outcome can sometimes be most unreasonable! It's possible to think logically to the wrong conclusion.

So, we can't knock faith just because it doesn't have the empirical street cred of the five senses. The journey to truth is always fraught with peril.

But none of this captures what John the Evangelist is getting at in today's text! Somewhat of a philosopher himself, he might have agreed with Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, and Hume on matters of knowing and being, but John moves beyond sense perception, reason, emotion, language, intuition, imagination, memory, and faith.

John raises a new possibility! We learn by *love*. *We sometimes come to knowledge by way of love*.

The question: How do we know that we love others? John's answer: If we love God and obey his commandments (see v. 2).

This leads to the additional question, "But how do we know that we love God?" John has an answer for this as well: obedience. We know not only through love, but through the evidence of that love, *obedience*. How do we know that we love our mothers? Most mothers would answer: *obedience*.

Another word we might use for obedience is *praxis*, or practice, or even experience. Walking the talk is a powerful way of certifying that we're not all talk and no walk; we're not all hat and no cattle. Rather, the practice of our moral code, core beliefs and our faith delivers a strong message to our souls: we love God; and we know that we love God; and we love those who love God and even those who have not yet come to God.

No one can know everything. No way. Some people are street smart, car smart, book smart, people smart, money smart, and so on. You might be a humanities person, while your spouse is all math and sciences.

But we're also people of faith. One area of knowledge we might be interested in is *faith* knowledge. What do we know about our faith? In just a few verses in today's text, the apostle John makes several key statements:

- Belief in Jesus as the Christ is evidence that we are children of God, the parent (v. 2).
- Love of God and love of the children of God are intertwined and linked. One cannot love one and not the other (v. 2).

- Evidence of the depth of our love of God is the level of our obedience to the will of God (v. 3).
- There is some way in which the children of God are winners, world-conquerors (v. 4).
- The weapon in the hands of us world-conquerors is faith (v. 4).
- These winners or world-conquerors are those who believe Jesus is the Son of God (v. 4).

Of course, the Bible has much more to say about the content of the body of faith, but this is what the apostle says in our text for today. In this area of what we might call “faith knowledge,” some of the things we should acquire include the nature and work of Jesus Christ, and our love obligation to others, as well as to God.

In a world of lying politicians, misleading social media assertions, text message scams using your Pastor’s name, and the like, one wonders what has happened to a preference for the truth. Perhaps we’re unaware of the factors that influence us as we try to gain knowledge.

For example, we may not understand the nature of knowing itself, that is, the differences between information, data, faith, or opinion. We may be insulated from a body of knowledge and opinion beyond the walls of our particular political or religious tribe. What we take for granted as gospel truth might be heresy for others.

We might be unaware that age, education, cultural background, and experience influence the sources we use and prefer, the responsibilities we’re willing to assume and the claims we make.

When assessing criteria for truth, we might not understand why it is important to consider coherence and consensus as crucial in the quest for truth.

Why it is necessary to assess the reliability of reason, sense perception, faith, memory, etc., as trustworthy justifications for the claims we make, or the claims someone else makes. If it's incoherent, not building consensus, not reasonable, not faithful, or refers to your Pastor as Rev. Douglas S. Gunkelman, then it's probably not true.

And, we might even hear the readers of John's letters saying what all of us have said at one time or another: "Why do I need to learn this? Do I need to take notes? Is there going to be a test?" In other words, we might not be inclined to learn math, history, or science if we don't think it's going to be knowledge we're actually going to use.

We may feel the same way about learning more about the nature and work of Jesus Christ. Or about the nature and essence of God, our duties to those of the faith, and even those outside of the faith, our responsibilities to our fellow human beings, especially the poor and the marginalized. We know our county jail is full of people arrested with mental illness and drug possession. We know they are addicts who will come out of jail, use again, and end up worse than before if not dead from an overdose. We have done those funerals for our loved ones here at Divinity. Five of us from Divinity helped cut the ribbon last Tuesday for our new Cuyahoga County Diversion Center where police can take addicts rather than booking them to our overcrowded jail. Rather than sitting in a jail cell with several other inmates, they will now receive treatment for their addictions. This is the first Diversion Center in Ohio as we join a handful of other states who already have them.

We just might not want to hear it. In fact, we might be fearful of gaining such knowledge. With knowledge comes responsibility. We were told by parents and teachers when we were little that ignorance is no excuse.

But now as adults, if we're honest, we kind of believe it down deep: *Knowing God could be dangerous to my health, that is, my financial health and my lifestyle health.* Better just not to know.

The apostle John is concerned about knowing. He wants us to know!

Just as John wrote extended essays that became the Gospel of John and the 2 letters of John, perhaps this would be a good exercise for us to follow our Confirmands' examples in writing our own faith statements.

Even if you were to write just a paragraph or two — what would sharing the extent of your knowledge of the faith look like?

It's a daunting challenge. But give it some thought. While you're thinking about it, be comforted with the good news that our mission, our salvation, God's love for us and God's providential care for us are not matters about which we need to guess or estimate.

Steven Conroy knows that God cares for him. On March 8th, when Steven was riding his Harley Davidson on a country road as the sun was setting, a pick-up truck with a drunk driver was suddenly crossing the road in front of him. As he crashed into the side of the truck with no helmet, he knew he was not alone. A guardian angel, whether it was his father, Dick, or Jesus himself, which is what I experienced, it was not Steven's day to die. He knew something greater than himself was with him. A broken ankle, separated pelvis, two broken wrists later, Steven was on the life-flight to Metro very much alive. It's been a difficult road of surgeries and rehab, but Steven knows he is not alone.

We can *know*! God loves us! We love others. And Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Amen.

May the peace of God . . . #619 – I Know That My Redeemer Lives!