

When I was in seminary, it was required that every student take a full year of study in the ancient biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew. Well known and well agreed upon by everyone, the Old Testament was originally read, and is still read today by the Jewish community, in Hebrew. While the New Testament was first written and read in Greek. Like those who wish to learn any language, you generally don't start with the big words but with the small ones, the simple ones. In the case of learning Greek, that meant starting with 1st John.

No one knows for sure who wrote this brief letter. It would be unfair to assume that just because they wrote using simple words, they themselves must have been of simple mind, or that that they were writing to people of simple minds. For anyone who reads the full letter will find that the author is writing about something that is far from simple. Vivienne read for us what might be considered the letter's summary, which tells us where the author is trying to get to. As far as number of words on a page go, it actually is quite simple. “Friends, let us love and be loved.” But to get there we first have to get through the beginning of the letter, which starts out like this:

“We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us, so that our joy may be complete.”

On the surface, it too actually sounds very simple. “We declare to you what we have heard, what we have seen, what we have touched.” In other words, the writer is wanting to establish that the whole purpose of this letter they are writing is to tell it like it is. “Look, I'm just going to give it you straight. This isn't an editorial in some newspaper. I'm just going to tell you how it is—what I've seen and heard.” That's simple enough. Until we realize that the thing they're talking about isn't a thing at all. It's God. God is the subject of this letter. Who is God? Where is God? How do you know God? And suddenly we realize this is not so simple after all.

What do you know of God, and how do you know it? There are, perhaps, as many ways to answer this question as there are people in this room. What do you know of God, and how do you know it? One way to answer this question is not to answer it at all. God as the Great Unknown, the Mystery that can't be solved. Infinitude, uncontainable, beyond all reasonable measures and definitions of what can be known. I take some comfort in this answer. In a world that doesn't seem to have all the answers I want, I'd like to know that somewhere, someone does have them, and that even if I can't have them, they are in safe keeping with God.

Another, more practical answer to the question, what do you know of God, and how do you know it? is to point to theology, to the things we have put in writing about God, and maybe even dared to say, this much we do know.

Sitting here today, we are not part of a church that tends to recite any creeds. It's a rare occasion that we get everyone on their feet to say in one voice something that we all believe. It's not that we don't have things we believe as a church—I don't know if I'd want to go to church that couldn't tell you a single thing they believe—but as crusty New England Congregationalists and as members of the *United Church of Christ*, we do not impose belief. We are a bit suspicious of hierarchy and anyone who might try to tell us what and how to believe. We try to keep an open and curious mind and to err instead on the side of belonging. And this may have a lot to do with why a lot of us are here, because looking around, I wonder how many of us left behind churches that felt more intent on belief than belonging.

I can't help but think this morning of our brothers and sisters in the United Methodist Church, who at their annual conference in St. Louis this past week turned down a motion that would have allowed members of the LGBTQ community to serve openly as pastors, and that would also have allowed congregations to decide on a local level whether to bless the marriages of same-sex couples. The decision has been described as nothing short of painful for all sides, as members and friends of the gay community who had long hoped for the measure to pass, are now likely to pull out of the United Methodist Church by the thousands, while those who voted against the measure will remain in a church much diminished in size. On the one hand, there is no question that in voting against the

measure, members of the LGBTQ community feel their church voted against them. On the other hand, those who voted against the measure, and who ultimately won the vote, feel vilified by the minority as unloving and unfaithful. When in fact, they saw themselves as being faithful to God and their understanding of scripture.

I don't know what the answer is for the United Methodist Church, or for any church, today. I do know that it is much easier to impose belief than it is to practice belonging. I do know that if we went around the room and I asked everyone who wished their church to be a more visible sign of welcome to the gay community—as well as to all the other disenfranchised, stigmatized populations in our community—if I asked all those people to raise their hands, some hands would go up. And some of us might be surprised to discover who we're sitting next to.

I know there are souls among us this morning who are deeply concerned about any number of issues—political, social, moral, and otherwise—and who wonder why their church isn't speaking out more at times. I also know there are souls among us whose world is so fractured and broken this morning that you can't possibly bear another issue. You're here just hoping to get some rest.

I know that for all the different types of churches out there, it would make things cleaner and clearer for you, and for me perhaps, if I just stood up here and said, "This is what we believe around here, and this is how we expect you to behave. If that doesn't work for you, there's the door." Because I've been around. I'm not that old, but I've been around, and I can tell you, the way we do church around here is the messiest thing I've ever seen. Every voice, every voice from Vivienne age 8 to Bill age 88, getting to be heard. Every person getting a place at the table. Every gift we have to offer being affirmed. Every burden shared. Every disagreement listened to and understood.

Belonging is messy. It forces us to love in ways that are beyond all reasonable measures and definitions. Yes, belief would be easier, I think.

What do you know of God, and how do you know it? It was Karl Barth, one of the most prolific and wordiest theologians of the 20th century—Barth wrote volumes and volumes of books on the teachings and beliefs of the Christian church—filled up entire libraries—but it was also Barth who wrote this: "This much is certain, that we have no theological right to

set any sort of limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ. Our theological duty is to see and understand it as being still greater than we had seen before.”

What do you know of God, and how do you know it? Tell me what you believe, and I’ll show you where I belong. I’ll show you a loving kindness even greater than we had seen before.

There is a lot we could say this morning in answer to this question. I think Jesus said it best, though, when once upon a time, gathered around a table with the likes of you and me, he took bread, broke it, and passing it around said, “This is my body, given for you, now make sure everyone gets some.” Amen.