

WE KNOW GOD
Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020
Romans 11:33-36

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Romans 11:33-36, the first part of our Second Reading from before: **How deep are the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is to search out His decisions and to trace His ways!** ³⁴ **For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His adviser?** ³⁵ **Or who has first given God something that He should pay him back?** ³⁶ **For all things are from Him, and through Him, and for Him. To Him be the glory for ever! Amen!**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your Truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Israel had an incomparable God who watched over her. Isaiah had asked: "*Who has determined the Spirit of the LORD, and what man can be His advisor to instruct Him?*" (Is. 40:13). God knows all things. As Isaiah asked "Who served as God's advisor?" the answer is obvious. No one had more knowledge than God. The most intelligent human being may be acclaimed by his or her society for the significant contributions made to some field of expertise. Still, we measure such greatness only by comparison with other humans, not by comparison with the omniscience of God. He is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator.

In the few verses we have before us today, the Apostle Paul repeats the question: "**For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His adviser?**" It's a good question - who does understand God? Who has known Him? Did God take one of us and make him His confidant? Did God talk over with him in advance His decisions and His ways, and ask his advice so that this person can search out and trace for us the infinite mysteries of the wisdom and knowledge employed? That would, indeed, be a wonderful person!

In one sense, however, the answer to the question, “**who has known the mind of the Lord?**” is us! Because God has chosen to reveal Himself, His nature, and His will to us, we can lay claim to knowing God - certainly not in His fullness, for that is beyond our finite frame. Still, we know Him in a way no other people know Him. Since we are His children, He has revealed His nature and His will to us. Because He also dwells in us by virtue of the Holy Spirit who has been given to each one that believes, we can also understand the revelation and believe it.

Therefore, we know God, while others can only *guess*. Sometimes their guesses are close to the truth, but usually, they are way off the mark.

Many people imagine God as being uncaring or absent or too far away to make a difference. They believe that whatever one says about God is good enough. Their line of reasoning seems to be that God is so huge and has so much on His plate that He cannot be troubled by us mere humans. He doesn't care what we think of Him.

We have all encountered theologians of this type. While they hold forth on God and His nature and His identity as though they know something, in reality, they do not. They boldly assert that God is like *this*, or God would not consider doing *that*.

The trouble with this, though, is that in making such a pronouncement, such people have no foundation outside of their own emotions or prejudices. No passage in Scripture asserts what they say. Instead, there are typically plenty of passages that directly contradict them. Besides, God says He wants to be known for who He is. That is His name, after all! Remember what He said to Moses at the burning bush: “*I Am who I Am*” (Exodus 3:14). The fact that God doesn't strike down every person who says something stupid about Him doesn't mean that He doesn't care, it means that He cares about them enough to give them space to grow and learn.

Also, the fact that there are many wrong ideas about God floating about, and many having so many followers, doesn't mean that no one can know, either! What it does mean is that the Bible is right. God's Word says that by nature, the mind is hostile to God.¹ It tells us that there is a devil out there messing with us, trying to

¹ Romans 8:7

keep us from knowing the truth about God.² God desires that we know, understand, and trust in Him. From Old to New Testament, that is the message. Again, through Isaiah, God has said: *“I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask for Me; I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, ‘Here am I, here am I,’ to a nation which did not call on My name”* (Isaiah 65:1). And Paul said to Timothy, *“God our Saviour... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:4).

God wants to be known and has revealed Himself. He insists on being known for who He is in truth and what He is like. Anything else is a false God, an idol, something that doesn't really exist - except in the minds of sinful men who are fleeing from the One who does exist. What one says about God and believe about God is significant for life and eternity. It doesn't change God, but it can shape our relationship with Him - or determine whether we actually have one or not. Jesus once said: *“If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,”* (John 8:31-32). Several times, the Apostles refer to Christians simply as those who *“know the truth.”*

What we know about God a mystery, and it is, in the sense that it is something we would never have reasoned our way to. It is the inner nature of God *as He is*, not something observable from the outside. God had to reveal it to us Himself. The Church coined a unique word for this unique revelation: God is a Trinity, which is a noun, or Triune, which is an adjective. The word itself is not from the Bible. Still, the Latin words for ‘three’ and ‘one’ press together into one word to capture the revelation that God is Three Persons in One Divine Being, or essence. Having said that, we have just scratched the surface. Still, we have what is arguably the best description or definition of God's nature in the Athanasian Creed. We can talk about God, but even as we do, we don't clearly understand how it works - or how He works. **“How impossible it is to search out His decisions and to trace His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?”** But that is okay.

God should be somewhat beyond our complete comprehension. Nevertheless, what He does reveal about Himself, He does so as a form of identification. As complex and somewhat confusing as it is, it the real deal. Anything direct and

² 1 Peter 5:8

straightforward, something that makes perfect sense to us, is a counterfeit. God wants us to know Him and trust Him. “*I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images*” He says (Isaiah 42:8). Remember, the word translated “LORD” is the name of God, “*I Am who I Am,*” abbreviated into one word. That is also the basis for God’s authority and relationship to the people of Israel - I am the LORD! It is the reality of who He is that is the foundation for His glory and His authority. He speaks, and we listen because He is the LORD. That title is a relationship, one that we honour when we now speak of Jesus Christ as Lord.

The whole relationship of the Old Testament was built on God being who He is, and on all that He had done for His chosen people. It was a relationship of choice and grace and love, on the one side, and faith and fear and receiving on the other. Today, in Jesus Christ, we see the fullness of the nature of God more clearly, but the relationship is still one of grace and love from God and by God. Only, today, we can see the depth of that love so much more clearly. We do not know God as the One who thunders at the top of a mountain or causes plagues to force others to set us free or makes manna appear on the ground each morning. No! We know Him as a loving heavenly Father, who has sent His only Son to become one of us and share in what it is to be human and to experience the troubles of this world. The Father has sent the Son to live without sin and earn what we did not and could not, and then to die as we have earned and deserved, taking our place in death and under the righteous judgment of God against sin and the sinner.

Our knowledge of God is the knowledge of the cross and the empty tomb, of forgiveness of sins and the free gift of eternal life to all that believe. We know Him through the work of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who has given us the Word and faith and hope and brings us the grace of God in Word and Sacrament. That is God as we meet Him here in His Word and worship. We understand that God has the entire universe to run, but He has shown us that He is not too great or grand or busy to humble Himself to be born of a virgin and walk the earth as a man, to redeem us from our sins and rescue us for life in glory with Him.

As we mentioned earlier, some people suggest that God has bigger fish to fry, and cannot be paying attention to each of us. But think about that. We humble

humans can develop systems to track millions upon millions of mobile phones and digital devices and to monitor them and see who is talking terrorism and who is plotting crimes. Still, somehow we imagine God cannot be up to the task of looking down on each one of us, caring for us and guiding us and listening to our prayers and answering? Talk about human arrogance! We can do it, but God cannot?

God has spoken to us through Scriptures and explained Himself and His will to us. And what is His will for us? **Our salvation**.

God is, by His nature, so much more complex than we could ever conceive. Yet He tells us about it so that we shall not be deceived by those who want an imitation that is simple and housebroken and stands in the corner and waits for us to acknowledge Him. That is the role of an idol. The One who reveals Himself in Scripture is all-powerful and all-knowing, and Triune. He has His eyes on us, and His heart is filled with compassion and love for us. He also has a plan for us, each one of us. That plan is, like God, infinitely complex and beyond our tracing out at times, but He has revealed that it is good and for our welfare and salvation.

In broad outlines, I can tell you that it is His will that we trust Him, and keep in the front of our minds at all times that He is with us and preserves us. He would have us live out our lives in the light of that confidence and in connection with those whom He has called to faith by the preaching of His Word. We identify with that group by looking around when in worship. While it is possible that one or another of our fellow-members are not sincere in their confession, that is not our job to discern. God will do that. Instead, we are called to love one another and serve each other and encourage one another in the faith. We are to help each other walk in a manner worthy of the high calling, which is ours in Christ Jesus.

Finally, we are to be open and upfront about knowing God. We know Him as He is: loving, forgiving, attentive to us and present among us, Three Persons in One divine essence, always listening to our prayers. Our lives are not out of control, just out of *our* control. He is always leading and shaping and guiding us. What we are living in and through is not always going to make sense to us, but it does to God - and He would have us trust in Him and walk by faith, being faithful and steadfast in Him. We just need to remember that our lives are about Him, just as His life was all about us!

That is the message Paul gives today, and he finishes by telling us, “**To Him be the glory for ever!**” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord God, we rejoice that we are Your children because of Your constant love and mercy. We are what we are purely by Your grace. You have made us Your own, and fulfilled all Your rich promises to us. You give power and strength to Your people. Therefore hear our prayers as we come to You, not in our own name or goodness, but in the name and by the merits of Jesus Christ.

We praise You for the glorious Gospel of Your grace. We rejoice to know that You have kept Your word by sending Your Son Jesus Christ when the right time came, to give His flesh, and to rise again on the third day so that through Him we may never taste death.

We thank You for the apostles’ sure witness to Christ’s resurrection in Your holy Word, on which our faith can stand firm. Fill us with love and faith in our risen Lord, so that we may live in a joy that words cannot fully express, and that we may confidently wait for eternal fellowship with You in the life to come.

Give us Your Spirit’s power to remain strong in our faith, in spite of all the doubt and ridicule of our age. Keep us each day in repentance for sin, in humble reliance on Your mercy, and in the peace of Your forgiveness. Give us such love for You that we may devote our whole lives to serving You in cheerful obedience.

Pour Your Holy Spirit’s power on the Church, that it may take Your Gospel to others, and proclaim Jesus Christ to them as their only hope of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Defend Your Church from its enemies and from all false teaching, that it may know no other Gospel than the one You gave it once and for all.

We pray for our country. Give us leaders in all walks of life who respect Your commandments, promote what is good, and oppose what is evil, so that our citizens may live in harmony, peace, and uprightness, and show concern for the good of all. We thank You for the rain that has received over large parts of the nation, and pray that You would continue to bless us with weather appropriate to our needs.

We pray for our homes. Give all parents a burning desire to teach their children to know, love, and respect You in Jesus Christ. Enable all families to live together in peace, love, and true wisdom.

Hear the prayers of the suffering, the bereaved, the needy, the homeless, the wounded, the worried, and the despairing. Lead them in mercy out of all that distresses them. Deliver us from every evil of body and soul, and at our last hour mercifully take us from the troubles of this life to Yourself in heaven.

Give us these things, O Father, and whatever else is necessary for us, in the name of Jesus, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

12 Pentecost (Proper 16)

Isaiah 51:1-6

¹ “Listen to Me, you who pursue righteousness and who search for the LORD. Look to the rock from which you have been hewn and to the quarry from which you have been dug! ² Look to Abraham, your ancestor, and to Sarah, who gave you birth! When I called him, he was only one person, and I blessed him and made him many.”

³ For the LORD will comfort Zion. He will comfort all its ruins. He will make its wilderness like Eden and its desert like the Garden of the LORD. Joy, gladness, thanksgiving and the sound of singing will be found in it. A promise that God is ready to save His people

⁴ “Pay attention to Me, My people! Listen to Me, My nation! For Teaching will go out from Me, and I shall establish My justice in an

instant as a light for the peoples. ⁵ My righteousness is near. My salvation will go out, and My arms will bring justice to the peoples. The coastlands will put their hope in Me and wait eagerly for My arm. ⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens and look at the earth beneath! For the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who dwell in it will die like gnats. However, My salvation will last for ever, and My righteousness will not be frustrated.

Romans 11:33-12:8

³³ How deep are the riches of God’s wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is to search out His Decisions and to trace His ways! ³⁴ For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His adviser? ³⁵ Or who has first given God something that He

should pay him back? ³⁶ For all things are from Him and through Him and for Him. To Him be the glory for ever! Amen!

^{12:1} Therefore, I appeal to you, fellow-Christians, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual worship. ² Do not conform to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may approve of what God wants, namely, what is good, pleasing and perfect!

³ For I tell everyone among you, through the grace that God has given to me: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think! Rather, think of yourself with sober judgment, as God has given a measure of faith to each one! ⁴ For, as we have many members in one body and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. ⁶ We have charismatic gifts that are different according to the grace that has been given to us. If we have prophecy, let us use it in agreement with the faith! ⁷ If we have ministry, let us use it in our ministering! If anyone is a teacher, let him use it in teaching! ⁸ If anyone

encourages others, let him use it in encouraging! If anyone shares, let him be generous! If anyone is a leader, let him do it diligently! If anyone shows mercy, let him do it cheerfully!

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ When Jesus came to the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴ They answered, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

¹⁵ He asked them, "You, however, who do you say I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but My Father, who is in heaven.

¹⁸ I also tell you that you are Peter, and, on this rock, I shall build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. ¹⁹ I shall give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you tie up on earth will be tied up in heaven, and whatever you untie on earth will be untied in heaven."

²⁰ Then He warned the disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Christ.