

1 Sermon, January 23, 2011

Texts: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Luke 16:10-17

Title: "God Only Knows"

If you were here last week, you know that today I'm preaching a part of a sermon series on the the language we use about God. Specifically, I'm taking one of the phrases we use with God's name in it, and seeing if we really mean it.

Today's phrase is "God only knows."

This could mean several things:

God only *knows*.

Could be a statement of faith, that God does, indeed, know.

God *only* knows.

Could be an appreciation of a mystery, that there is so much we don't understand, but God does.

God only knows.

Could be a remark of resignation. I sure don't know! Don't ask me!

But let's take this phrase as a sign of humility. God knows. We don't. There are many, many things we don't know. In the grand scheme of things, we are a small part of God's creation. We are dwarfed by God's majesty and goodness.

So we ought to be humble.

If we really mean "God only knows," it ought to make us humble.

In fact, it might be better to say, "Only God Knows." That makes it even clearer.

That, in part is what the apostle Paul wrote about in today's reading from second Corinthians.

He wrote about a personal experience of God's grace, being shown in perhaps a vision or even being transported to heaven, where he saw wondrous things. He could boast about such things.

But Paul doesn't boast, because that is not the only fact of his life. He is humbled by a physical ailment that makes him know he is not on

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top of the world. He is not in charge. He is loved by God, but he's not unique.

If anyone in history can talk about arrogance humbled, it was Paul, who was zealous for the law and persecuted Christians. Then after his conversion, he was still zealous, but he learned to put it in perspective. He was not so powerful as he had thought he was.

I'm reminded of Muhammad Ali, who, when was in his prime, flew on an airplane. They were about to take off when the flight attendant reminded him to fasten his seatbelt. He replied, "Superman don't need no seatbelt." The attendant replied, "Superman don't need no airplane either." Ali put on his seatbelt.

Only God knows is that kind of reminder that we ought to be humble.

I remember a recent episode of Masterpiece Mystery, in which the character Hercule Poirot is told he should be more humble. Poirot says, "I shall excel in humility." "No one shall be more humble than myself."

The apostle Paul, with all his good motivations, all his prayer and desire to serve could not reverse the affliction he called a 'thorn in the flesh.' He was not "Paul Almighty." He was just Paul.

In a similar way, the reading from Luke shows Jesus speaking to a group of Pharisees. The Pharisees sneer at Jesus, because they think they have a greater wisdom. Jesus points out that the very Law of Moses that the Pharisees hold in such high esteem contradicts their position.

The Pharisees were good people, who tried to do the right thing, but they needed humility. They especially should not be proud of money. They should not think that they are any better, just because they have wealth.

There are many references to humility in New Testament, so you know that Jesus and the early church both thought that this was important.

Jesus reference to the "Poor in Spirit" is thought to be encouraging humility. The early Christians thought so:

A Fourth Century Christian, Abba John of Thebaid, said:

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Above all things, a monk ought to be humble. In fact, this is the first commandment of the Savior who said: Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

St. Augustine once said, "Should you ask me what is the first thing in religion, I would reply, "The first, the second and third thing therein is humility."

Benjamin Franklin said it this way: "If I ever achieved humility no doubt I would become proud of it."

Humility is difficult. It is a struggle in Christian faith. It is a struggle because we would like to think better of ourselves than we really are -- and we are often tempted to think worse of ourselves than we really are.

Paul was not humble in the way we usually think about it. He knew his abilities, especially his ability with words -- and he drove home his point. He never pretended that God had given him small skills.

But Paul was humble, because he put it all in perspective - how much greater is God. And how helpless he was without the gifts of others.

Paul was simply honest about what he had been through, honest to the best of his ability about his own character.

You see, humility is not a matter of keeping quiet about your gifts, and hiding your light under a bushel. Humility is not degrading yourself, and considering yourself lowly. Humility is not false modesty, saying "I'm not really that good!" Nor, of course is humility pretending you're better than you are!

Instead, Humility is a getting rid of false notions about oneself, whether they be of grandeur or of baseness. It is judging ourselves for what we are: sinners - loved by God and capable of much good.

John Wesley said it this way:

"Humility, a right judgment of ourselves, cleanses our minds from those high conceits of our own perfections, from that undue opinion of our own abilities and attainments . . . without the Spirit of God, we can do nothing but add sin to sin . . . it is impossible for us even to think a good thought without the supernatural assistance of the Spirit.

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Humility does not deny accomplishment, but it gives proper credit to God's part in the accomplishment.

Humility means accepting one's own strengths and weaknesses, and knowing what you can't do by yourself. Humility means asking for help from God and others.

Here's a 1600-year-old story from the Christians of the desert in Egypt:

It was said about an old man that he endured seventy weeks of fasting, eating only once a week. He asked God about certain words in the Holy Scripture, but God did not answer him. Then he said to himself: Look, I have put in this much effort, but I haven't made any progress. So now I will go to see my brother, and ask him. And when he had gone out, closed the door and started off, an angel of the Lord was sent to him, and said: Seventy weeks of fasting have not brought you near to God. But now that you are humbled enough to go to your brother, I have been sent to you to reveal the meaning of the words. Then the angel explained the meaning which the old man was seeking, and went away.

Humility is not about putting ourselves down. It is instead about pointing up! It is remembering continually to point to heaven and acknowledge God in all things.

Christians can afford humility - because we are confident that God loves us and works in us. We do not need to be self-important, or lacking in confidence. God made us what we are! And God will lead us into the future.

And Christians need humility - because it is the breeding ground for faith! A humble heart - one that has no false notions about itself - has fewer barriers to growth in love.

I'd like to end with one more story from those Christian monks in the Egyptian desert 1600 years ago:

The devil appeared to a brother, in the disguise of an angel of light, and said to him: I am the angel Gabriel and I have been sent to you. However, the brother said to him: See if you are not being sent to someone else. I certainly do not deserve to have an angel sent to me. Immediately, the devil disappeared.

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By the grace of God, we may be humble -- we may be honest with ourselves and others about who we are, sinners in need of God's love, but capable of much good.

It is good news. I invite you to believe it, and share it with others.

Amen.

""Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law." Luke 16:10-17, NIV.

"I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no-one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. To keep me from becoming

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conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, NIV.