



# Thank God for What You Don't Know

*TEXT*  
*Psalms 139:1-18*  
*1 Corinthians 13:4-13*

February 11, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**W**e have been talking about truth. We reflected on the teaching of Jesus when he said he is the truth. Truth is a relational reality. We can only know it fully in relationship.

We spoke of how some truth is larger than fact, but that these days it is important for us to assert that facts are not something we make up, but something we discover. Facts matter.

Last Sunday, we sat with Bartimaeus and reflected on the reality that we all have blind spots, and when we are blind to truth, it is easy to fail to know we are blind. We assume we see everything clearly.

So, after all this conversation about the truth and how you know the truth, I wonder, if someone you know, not a stranger off the street, but if someone you know said to you, "Hey, I notice you go to that Village Church. I've been thinking lately about God. And I wonder if you could tell me about God." If someone asked you that, what would you say?

You might think, "Here's the number of my church. Call a pastor, that's the pastor's

job." But your friend doesn't know the pastors here; your friend knows you. So, what would you say? I bet you would have more to say than you think.

You might speak of God the Creator. That creation is not just an act of power, but a work of love. You have had moments when the beauty and mystery of creation has moved you. You might talk about that.

You might speak of God as strength — because you have known people, and there have been times in your own life when you have found strength that you didn't know you had, strength to press on, even with a broken heart or a frightened spirit. You might talk of how God was in that.

Or you might speak of some ordinary moments — during a hymn, or sharing Communion, or delivering presents for the angel tree, or serving at the food pantry, or sharing a meal at a table — where the human connection was so palpable, it was evident that God was there.

Or you may just speak of love — that God is present wherever there is love. It's more than a warm feeling; it is the ordinary yet bold choice to live for the good of another

in any given moment. God is in that.

But if you are like me, there is going to be a point when the only way to talk about God is to admit what you don't know. Because God is God and we are not. Because God is the creator and we are the ones created. So, for us, there is always a degree of mystery to God.

God is always bigger than our best idea, so when we speak of God, there must always be some humility in our confession. We come to a point where we must say, "I don't know."

We can speak with conviction, but not with certainty. The psalm says, "God's knowledge is too wonderful for us; it is so high, we cannot attain it."

The apostle says the same. Paul writes, "Now we know only in part. ... We see in a mirror dimly."

Carol has a friend from our church in Florida named Dana. Dana has a son who is the same age as our Nathan. They were playmates when they were younger. Shortly after we moved to Kansas City, Dana and her son came to visit. We were going to take our elementary-aged boys bowling, and I was looking up bowling alleys in the phone book. (Back

in the olden days, we had phone books).

I remember looking at the little lines in the phone book, saying, “This phone book is smudged. All the print is blurry. It must have been a bad run.” Dana took off her glasses and placed them on my nose, and presto, it was clear.

I wonder if Paul had similar eye problems. If so, maybe that is what inspired him to compare our knowledge of God with blurry vision. We see some things, but we can’t see everything. We know only in part. There is an unknowable aspect to God. There is mystery with God.

I think that is a good thing. I think this unknowable aspect to God is one reason there are so many different views of God; different religions and different practices.

It raises a question. This is a theological question: Why would God create a world in which people understood God so differently? Wouldn’t it be better if we all had the same language for God, the same understanding of God? We were all on the same page? We all knew God so clearly, there could be no disagreement as to who God is? Surely, that would be better, right?

No, because if we all agreed, then we would assume we knew God completely. And without knowing it, we would reduce God to our best idea; and God would no longer be God, but just the best of us.

God is bigger than our best ideas, and the result of that is

mystery. It also means that God is big enough to save us, which is something we can’t do for ourselves.

“Now we know only in part,” Paul says. There is never a Sunday that I stand before you that I don’t resonate with Paul ... *we know only in part*. That’s why I am always saying to you, “If I understand the text.”

When I say that, I am telling you what I think this passage means for you and me. But I can’t be sure that I am right — because, inasmuch as these words point us to the living Word, it is always a word that is bigger than any and all of us. It is only a word that can be confessed with humility. I will be honest and tell you the best truth that I can see, but like you, I see only in part.

The search for truth matters. We live in times when far too many are lazy with truth; too many are casual with truth; too many are satisfied with half-truth or cherry-picked truth. It is hurting us. The search for truth is important, but I have come to believe that our salvation does not rest in our knowing God, but in God knowing us.

The psalmist says, “O Lord you have searched me and known me. ... Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.”

Our salvation is not based on what we know; it is the confidence that we are known.

I heard about a grandmother named Wanda who texted her grandson and said, “I hope

you are coming to Thanksgiving dinner. Be here at 3:00.”

She got a text back: “Who is this?”

Wanda replied, “It’s your grandmother.”

She got another response: “Send me your picture.” Wanda took a selfie and texted that.

She got a picture in response, and it was only then that Wanda realized that she had not invited her grandson to Thanksgiving dinner, but she had invited a complete stranger. Her grandson had changed his cell phone number and failed to tell her. His old number was now the number for Jamal, an African American teenager, who was very surprised to learn that he had been invited by this white grandmother to come to Thanksgiving dinner.

Wanda and Jamal laughed at this. But the invitation was still on the table. Surprisingly, Jamal came to the feast. That was two years ago. They are friends now, and this past Thanksgiving, Jamal joined Wanda again, this time bringing pumpkin pie and his girlfriend.<sup>1</sup>

So, why do you suppose a black teenager would accept the accidental invitation from a white grandmother to share Thanksgiving together? Would you do that? It sounds pretty simple, but I think there are not many of us who are not looking for some place to belong, for a place that says, “You are welcome here. Here you can be known.”

As Paul describes love, there is nothing abstract about

it. Love is particular. That's how we love. We don't love in general; we love in particular. We love in moments. We love in choices. We love particular people with names and faces and needs and personalities.

If I understand the text, the witness of this faith is that God loves the same way. God doesn't just love, but God loves you — and that love will never let you go.

Two weeks ago, I told you about Pioneer 10, a spacecraft that was launched in 1973 and, as far as we know, is still speeding away from earth. The last time it was heard from was 2003, as it was on its way to the Aldebaran star. It will take 2 million years to reach that star.

It's a vast universe we find ourselves in. And the testimony of the faith is this: The God who fashioned it all, the God who loved it all into being, knows you — knows you better than you know yourself. There is no place you can go to escape her spirit. And that holy God loves you with a love that will never let you go.

And if that is all you know about God, it will be enough. And if a friend of yours ever asks, you can tell them: It's not what you know; it's that you are known.

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Rev. Dan Vigilante for sharing this story in a paper presented to the Movable Feast in January 2018.

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.