

UNCERTAIN SERMON SERIES

Knowing What You Don't Know; Prov. 3:5-6

Sept. 11, 2022

Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

How important is it to be right? I want to tell you a story about my need to be right that almost cost me the chance at true happiness.

It August 16, 2019, and I was spending the weekend in Lake Lure, NC, just outside Asheville. I went there to meet a woman I'd been talking with online for about a month. We initially were only meeting for breakfast and a hike, but after about 10 minutes with her I knew she was my person. We spent the weekend together and on this particular evening, we were waiting to have dinner before parting ways the next morning.

We were eating at a restaurant with a beautiful view of Lake Lure, Amy pulled out her phone so we could take a picture together with the lake as a backdrop. When she took the picture, she remarked what amazing pictures she was able to take with her new iPhone. I looked at the phone and noticed it had a home button on it, which newer iPhones don't have, so I assumed it was a refurbished phone.

I said to her, "Apple doesn't make phones with home buttons anymore. Did you buy the phone used?"

She said, "No, it's right out of the box. It's brand new."

And that's when I said probably the stupidest thing I have ever said in my life. I looked at her, and with a smug, all-knowing tone, I said, "Well, new to you."

Now that I know Amy, I am simply shocked that I'm not dead at the bottom of the lake right now. She had every right to smack me with the phone and throw me over the railing, or at least to end the date and run away from me as fast as she could. Instead, to her infinite credit, she called up a website that showed me that Apple was indeed making phones with home buttons again, to which I said, "Huh! How about that. You're right." And two years later, "new to you" is still a running joke with us.

Why is being right so important for some of us? In that moment, I was so focused on impressing Amy with my amazing knowledge of technology that I didn't stop to consider that I might be wrong. Had I done that then and at so many other times in my life, I would have realized that I'm not always as right as I think I am, and even if I am right, it doesn't matter. How many people's lives would be better if they remembered the mantra, "You can be right or you can have friends."

But here's the thing. We like to be right. We like to be in the know. We like to have information that people need (or that we think they need). Why else would shows like Jeopardy be so popular or people flock to local breweries for trivia night? Knowledge is power, and intelligence is a sign of strength. The more we know, the less unknown we have to deal with, and we humans don't like the unknown. We don't like to feel stupid. It's why some people dread taking their car to the mechanic, because they are being put into a situation where they will be ignorant, and ignorant people get taken advantage of. The more we know, the more confident we can be, the more certain we can feel.

So, how does that jive with a life of faith? When we like to know things, what do we do with a God who is utterly unknowable? This congregation is full of educated people, and not knowing is really, really hard for educated people. We are asked to believe things we can't know

for sure, to put our faith in a story written thousands of years ago in much different geographic place and culture. And, to be honest, some of us struggle with that. I wonder if the more you know, the harder it is to believe in God.

The Bible doesn't help in this regard. We'll be talking more about the Bible in the next few weeks, but because it is our primary way of knowing things about God, I need to say a few things today. First, we don't worship the Bible. We worship the God who is revealed to us in the Bible. It's a subtle but important difference. When we worship God, we are open to the ways God continues to move and work in our lives today. But if we worship the Bible, then we are stuck believing only what the Bible says, or what we think the Bible says, which doesn't allow God to keep working.

But, to be honest, we folks who need to be right kind of like it that way. It's a lot easier to be right when things don't change, like Apple making iPhones with home buttons years after they stopped making iPhones with home buttons. How can I always be right when things keep changing? That's especially true about God. If God keeps changing, then anything I think I know for sure is subject to change. But if we worship the Bible, then we can build walls to preserve what we know, what makes us feel secure. We stay in control, God makes perfect sense to us, and we can correct all the people who believe wrongly.

Amy and I were talking about this on a recent drive to Columbus. We passed several billboards espousing religious statements like "Hell is real" and "Jesus is coming" and "The world needs longer sermons." Amy didn't see that one but I swear it was there! We talked about the reasons people would spend good money to put up these billboards. Do we really think even one person saw that billboard and said, "Oh my gosh! Hell is real? I need to change my life!" My guess is the billboards elicit a lot more eyerolls than changed hearts. I believe the billboards were more about the person's need to assert their certainty than about sharing the gospel.

But here's why that approach to knowing God works in so many churches today. When you can say something with certainty, you are seen as strong, as authoritative, as worthy of respect and admiration. So, if I can say for sure what God says in the Bible, people listen, because most people aren't sure about God at all. It's like the saying, "In the land of the blind, the one-eyed person is king." In the land of ignorance about God, the person who can say they know for sure can have great influence. People will listen to them and follow them because they come across as being certain about God, as having a strong faith.

But is our goal to have a strong faith? If it is, I'm a failure. My faith wavers a lot. I go through periods of doubt and drought, times when I question God's goodness or God's promises. We're going to talk more about these moments next week, but for now I can say that I don't believe our goal as followers of Christ is to have a strong faith. It's to have a real faith, a faith that authentically embodies our joy and our grief, our moments of assurance and our moments of doubt. God wants us to be exactly who we are, and that includes our vulnerabilities and our frailty and moments when we're not sure about this whole faith thing. God wants all of us, even our uncertainty.

That means being willing to admit we don't know everything. I feel like I need to start a support group: All-Knowers Anonymous. The meeting would start with me saying, "Hi, I'm Kory," and the group would respond with, "Are you sure?" We may think it's scary to not know everything, but in reality, knowing that we don't know when it comes to faith brings with it an amazing kind of freedom. Rather than basing our faith on what we know, we can simply live into the joyous mystery of a relationship with God. Being able to say "I don't know" is the start of a

sacred journey where we move from the importance of correct belief and needing to be right to the radical joy of trusting in God.

I learned to love the Proverbs passage I read today from Amy, who leaned on these words during her time on the Appalachian Trail. That's an apt comparison to living a life of faith, walking a long and winding path, full of ups and downs, constantly journeying through unknown territory, sometimes simply focused on putting one foot in front of the other. There's so much about this life we don't know and can't make sense of, so why wouldn't we trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding? So often, our own understanding fails us, but God never does.

So many people make being right a hallmark of faith. If they can know for sure, then it minimizes the fear of not knowing, and it also gives them an enemy, someone to fight against. A faith built on certainty needs a "them," a group of people who believe differently, to which the certain person can point and say, "I'm right because they're wrong." The more we can assert our right-ness, the less we have to be open to the possibility that we may be wrong. But the problem lies in the fact that we will expend so much energy trying to prove we are right rather than be open to the new things God is doing. When that happens, being right becomes more important than trusting God, and the object of our worship becomes our own ego.

Being willing to admit there's so much we don't know about God is the first step toward a deeper faith, because it is in the not knowing that we are made vulnerable and are open to growing in our relationship with God. That's not unlike the vows we make when we are married. Amy and I made a commitment to each other when we were married, a commitment to trust and love each other, whether or not we fully understand each other or if the relationship is going well or poorly. We are still learning about each other, and probably will be for the rest of our lives. But even when we learn something we don't like – like one of us doesn't know as much about phones as he thinks he does – we still trust each other.

God isn't asking us for correct beliefs. God is asking us to trust in God, even when we don't know for sure everything we want to know. Because, as author Peter Enns says, faith is not a what word. It's a who word. Faith is not about what you believe, but who you believe in. Not being certain does not make faith less real or stable. It simply acknowledges that faith is enmeshed in the fullness of our humanity and can never be reduced to an intellectual assent. A wise person said, "Always entertain the possibility you might be wrong." And you know what? They're right. Especially when it comes to faith. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." I hope we can focus less on having faith, like it's an object to possess, and more on being faithful, trusting God through all the ups and downs of life. I've come to realize I don't know a lot of things, but I know God is always worthy of our trust.