

**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING  
JOHN 3:1-13; JUNE 11, 2006—TRINITY SUNDAY  
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We have a tender task today thanking our four staff members as they move on to the next phase of their careers and ministries.

Tender task, too, saying goodbye to the Becker family who have so long been a part of the fabric of Westminster and are headed to Nashville this summer.

I'd like to use the wonderful story of Nicodemus's meeting with Jesus—today's Scripture reading—to reflect on what Sawrie, Carol, Ginny and Maria have helped us do in our life as a congregation, and Carl in his work with our Personnel Committee and staff training.

We Presbyterians place a premium on knowledge. The very word “presbuteros” from which our name comes is Greek for “elder” or “wise person.”

Since the Reformation we said each person should be able to read in order to interpret the Scripture—else how can we discover God's purpose for our own lives? It is no accident that Presbyterians are known for founding schools.

Ministers are expected to be able to read the Scriptures in the original languages so that their interpreting the Word to the people will reflect accurate understanding of the text. I remember well the trials and tribulations of my struggles with those languages. Ordination still requires each candidate to have a working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew.

Today's story from the Gospel of John suits Presbyterians well. Nicodemus is one of us. He is an educated man. A learned fellow. When he comes to see Jesus in the middle of the night he comes with confidence in his intellectual credentials.

The first words out of his mouth reflect his bias toward knowledge, “teacher, *we know*” he says, self assured, trusting in the power of knowledge.

But Jesus surprises Nicodemus. Nicodemus soon finds he is over his head talking to Jesus. The conversation gets convoluted and confusing. Jesus talks about birth, but a birth Nicodemus does not understand. He talks about spirit and Nicodemus finds himself at a loss.

Perhaps Nicodemus's problem is rooted in his comfortable assumption, “teacher we know...” Lord knows knowing isn't the answer to all the world's problems. We can explain the inner workings of the atom, the intricacies of the human genome, the path of hurricanes, and the way to build a jet. Yet, our world suffers from systems that permit if not perpetuate hunger, disease, and violence.

I'm not saying knowledge is a bad thing. To the contrary. I have a knee problem from an old sports injury. In a few weeks I'm going to a specialist who does arthroscopic surgery. Hopefully, I won't need it. But if I do I am thankful to the knowledge that has made this non-invasive surgery possible.

The words on the statue on the college campus in the movie *Animal House* are right—Knowledge is good. Whether John Belushi would agree or not the library is actually one of the most exciting places on any campus.

But when it comes to our spiritual journey, knowledge is not an end. It is a means to an end. Because knowledge is so powerful sometimes we think of it either as a substitute for the act of belief or for some practice of the faith and prevent our own spiritual growth.

I heard the Tappit brothers on *Car Talk* yesterday. They were reading from their ‘truth in advertising’ file, ads they’d found from across the country. One was an ad for an entire set of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. The ad said, ‘just married last fall, selling encyclopedia, wife knows it all.’ Probably a few wives out there who could run that ad, too.

It reminds me of my sophomore year in college. After two philosophy courses—ancient and modern—I thought I knew everything. It’s where the word “sophomore” which means “wise fool” comes from.

Perhaps it is natural that we should approach God as a subject to be explained and mastered. But when we know so much about God we can be seduced into thinking it possible to know everything about God or at least everything that matters.

Yet, there is a paradox that can liberate us from being sophomores when it comes to God. I distinctly remember a point in my education when I realized how much I didn’t know. I’m sure you’ve had the same experience. And this it seems to me is the right approach to our spiritual journey.

Someone said our knowledge of God is like an island—surrounded by a vast ocean. What we know is the island. As we expand what we know, the island expands, but so does the coastline of the island, which means that the boundary between what we know, the island, and what we don’t know, the vast sea, continues to expand.

Maybe you noticed the quotes on the bulletin cover today: Luther’s, “A person becomes a theologian by living, by dying, by being damned, not by reading and speculating”; and Kierkegaard’s, “life is lived forward but understood backward.”

Both of them say the same thing—we become persons of faith not by knowing all there is to know about God but by using our knowledge to actively engage life.

Real understanding begins when we are conscious of ourselves and involved in the world. Socrates said know thyself. St. Paul said we would not be tested beyond our ability to respond, that is to use our knowledge of God and ourselves to help us face the challenge of today.

So what does this have to do with the ministries of Sawrie, Carol, Ginny, Maria and Carl?

Each one has helped us make connections between our faith and the world. For six years Sawrie has been saying to new members “here is a place you can *learn* about God and transform your life”;

Carol has been saying to our children in Sunday School and their parents “the Biblical stories will help you *discover* who you are and what God wants you to do”; Ginny, to our youth and ENERGY students, “what we *know* about God leads us to mission and service”; Maria to our volunteers, “*knowing* Jesus Christ causes us to build homes and help others”;

and Carl to our staff “*knowing thyself*” will make you a better, more aware member of your ministry team.

Nicodemus was confused at first, but then he got the hang of it. Knowing wasn't the end, it was the beginning.

The beginning of a new and transformed life. What he now understood, is that each of us is intimately known and loved by Christ. And he knew that with the power of that knowledge we are equipped to live radically different lives, free from fear and old debilitating behaviors.

Nicodemus's showing up to help bury Jesus after the crucifixion makes all the sense in the world. The last time he came to see Jesus was under the cover of night. Now this VIP Presbyterian risked being seen at the cross of a criminal in broad day light. His standing in the community was at risk. But old Nicodemus was beyond that. You see, he'd moved from putting his trust in the power of knowledge to putting his life in the hands of God.

May that light bulb of faith go on for you and me today. Amen.