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These Easter texts take us into relationships with God. The stories of Lent, the stories of Jesus' walk toward the cross and the invitation to walk with him. The Easter stories are about the resurrected Christ and what it means for us to live in relationship with the resurrected Christ. And today's text invites reflection on what it means to know God.

Paul, in the reading from Acts, is talking to the secular society – the pagan society – of the Greeks. And I'm not sure how different it is from ours. I think it's kind of interesting. I think he could almost have preached the same sermon to the average Northwesterner. This is a very un-churched part of the country. I just came back from Dallas which is the buckle on the Bible Belt, and it's a different culture! And I forget that – how very secular, relatively, the northwest is compared to places in the south.

Paul is talking to the Athenians who have kind of a general and open sense that there is God or gods and they want to make sure they're covering all their bases. This is kind of a funny story about them having an altar to the Unknown God.

But I think what that speaks to is the human heart's openness to the divine and that there is something, almost at an instinctive level, that we have that tells us that God is there. There are many folks who, whether or not they identify with a particular religious expression, are deeply related to the divine. They trust in God, they believe in God, but they may not have a name for this God that they acknowledge. And in the northwest we experience that a lot in the sense of the presence of the divine in nature. So many folks that you talk to would acknowledge that the beauty of creation somehow reflects the goodness of a creative God.

So one of the ways to know is this instinctive way of just seeing how beautiful the world is, or how good relationships are and trusting that all of this has meaning and purpose in some vague, unnamed way, but yet in some important way. I think that that is a common experience of people in relationship to God. The theologians call this 'general revelation', just in case you wanted to know. They put that whole way of seeing God, of just understanding that there is such a being and seeing it reflected both in nature and in human interaction as 'general revelation'.

Another way to know God is through formation in community and our experience of that would be a formation in Christian community. Where one goes beyond a general sense of God being out there to actually pursuing the knowledge of God through tradition. In our case, through Christian tradition and through the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures and through the community of faith and through the sacraments, through baptism and through Eucharist.

We experienced that in kind of a glorious fashion, I think, last Wednesday night when the famous St. Stephen's Eight were confirmed. We all had a spectacular time together with choir and bells and good food and wonderful music and Nedi with her

glorious fingernails... And we brought out all the bells and whistles, all of our churchiness. All of our churchiness, all of that stuff that we identify with – our prayer book and our liturgy and our candles and our altar and all that, you know, STUFF, which in it's very lavish celebration quality and also in its echoes of ancient tradition remind us of the greatness of God and God's presence in community. With beauty and joy.

We heard the scriptures read and we went back to our baptismal vows and named what it meant to be in relationship to God in quite specific ways. We get pretty specific about this. This is not longer just a 'general revelation' – we're saying that one not only lives, moves and has their being in an amorphous God, but that one has a particular set of purposes in that relationship. That we are called, for instance, to love one another. That we are called to respect the dignity of every human being. That we are called to repent of sin and return to the Lord. That we are called to be faithful to the apostles' teaching and to the prayers.

We have a way, a series of ways of behaviors that we practice in order to help us to know God and we have creeds that we affirm in order to kind of put some parameters around this understanding of God. And even if you don't like the creeds or you don't like the traditions or you have a problem with women's ordination or whatever – even that disagreement is a way in which we form and make more specific and make more concrete our relationship with God.

So another way of knowing God, in addition to the general way of perceiving God in the world, is this very specific path of the tradition and the liturgy and scripture. And I am grateful for it.

Because while I love the reality that God is with us and seeks us wherever we are, I also know that my limited sense of reality can be very distorted and I am grateful for the larger community of the faithful who give me different perspective and different ways of seeing and help to shape my awareness so that when I'm going sideways with whatever my life experience is, I have the testimony of the scriptures and the experience of the Christian faithful to pull me back and help me to trust and have faith and keep walking straight ahead, despite my personal experience.

I am privileged to share that gift with you. That we are accountable to one another in these ways and that we carry not only the community but the tradition throughout the centuries, for thousands of years, we carry all that wisdom and all that experience and all that struggle and it's wonderful, isn't it? It's a great and rich way of being in relationship with God.

Jesus, in the Gospel today, takes it yet another step. Paul talks about the God in whom we live and move and have our being. And the passage from Peter where he talks about the rite of baptism which grounds us in that God. Jesus points to a mystical relationship with God. He says, "I will be in you." Not only do we live and move and have our being in God, but God in Christ is in us. That's one of those texts that

sometimes Richard refers to as the *goo-goo-ga-joo* text – you know, ‘I am he and you are me and we are all together...’ Oh, never mind. If you remember the Beatles...

But that whole business about God is in Christ and Christ is in us and the Holy Spirit is coming – it’s one of the most foundational texts, actually, for a Trinitarian theology. That if you try to make Trinitarian theology to type you’re making a mistake. Because Jesus doesn’t do that. What he’s trying to do is talk about relationship in its larger sense. That relationship to God is possible and intimate. And this is interesting. He says the way to it is this: “If you love me”, he says, “You’ll obey my commandments and I will come to you and reveal myself to you.” Isn’t that interesting?

So we can know God in a general way and we can know God through the traditions and the scriptures, but there’s an intimate and personal way in which we can know God, too.

Jesus in this text is saying that the primary path to that intimacy with God is following Jesus; his teaching and his example. When we live his way, we open our hearts to him and we know him. We know him from the inside out. We embody him; we become the body of Christ when we live his way. And we grow in that relationship and we grow in connection to him and it may not be something that happens consciously, or it may.

But we know God by living the resurrected life of Christ in our day-to-day living. Which doesn’t mean that we walk around glowing or a couple of inches off the ground. It’s really concrete. It’s really concrete and down to earth. And it’s so subtle that sometimes we can miss it. But it is in the way that we love one another. It is in the way that we cherish creation. It is in the way that we pay attention to the things that matter and let go of the stuff that doesn’t. It is in our capacity for forgiveness, for compassion and tenderness and wisdom.

I got back from CREDO. It was a week of “Clergy Fluffing”. And while I was there (being fluffed) a wonderful man, Bishop Robert Anderson (who was bishop of Minnesota and retired from that and is now an assistant bishop in Los Angeles) told a wonderful story that I want to share with you. [It was] about this business of knowing God and what it means.

It was during a part of his episcopacy when he was a very, very, very busy man. A very, very important Bishop and he was running from place to place all the time.

He got a phone call one week from a little parish he was about to visit and they said, “Bishop we need to get your permission about something. We have a young man who is expected to be confirmed by you at your visitation this Sunday and we want to make sure it’s all right with you that he be confirmed.”

He said, “Well, tell me the story.”

And they said, “Well, he’s developmentally delayed, probably has a mentality of about a second grader and we’ve been working with him very hard to learn the creeds but it’s

not easy for him and we don't think he, he really doesn't understand. But he wants to be confirmed. So we want to make sure it's okay."

And the Bishop thought about it for a minute and said, "Well, I suppose it will be okay."

Well, he comes flying in as he normally does and there's no time to visit anybody or anything because he's doing three churches every Sunday. So he comes roaring in and he's all vested and he's in the procession and he comes round the corner as the procession comes in and he comes down the aisle and as he starts to come down the aisle there's a young man in the front row who stands up and waves and says, "I LOVE YOU BISHOP!" Which was not the normal way he was greeted. So he knew right away it was going to be an unusual liturgy.

It came time for confirmation and the other confirmands had been done and Marshall (the young man) and his parents came forth because Marshall was not only developmentally delayed, he was pretty awkward, physically. He was six feet tall, but he had a hard time holding still and his arms kind of swung around and he kind of lost his balance really easily. So his parents were on either side of him, helping him to come forward and stand there before the Bishop.

He was standing in front of the Bishop and the Bishop says in his good liturgical stage whisper, "Marshall, do you want to stand or kneel?"

Marshall said, "I WANT TO KNEEL!" Okay. So his parents were trying to help him get down, and as he's heading down, all of a sudden, as he's about halfway down then he stands up again and he says, "I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY!" The Bishop braces himself for this, and the man says: "I LOVE GOD. AND GOD LOVES ME." Okay. Pretty good. So then he starts to go down again and then he stands up again! And this time he looked around the room and he says, "I LOVE ALL THESE PEOPLE. AND ALL THESE PEOPLE LOVE ME!" Okay.

So finally, he kneels down for the last time and gets confirmed. The bishop lays his hands on him and he said, "You know, it was one of those things. I don't know who was getting blessed by whom, but the Holy Spirit was just flying."

Six months later, Marshall is now living in a group home with other young adults like himself and the Bishop comes back for his next visitation to this church. He comes around the corner again, he starts heading down the aisle and this time there are six young men in the front seats and they're all standing on the pew, waving. And Marshall said, "I TOLD YOU! I TOLD YOU HE WOULD COME!"

This is knowing God. I'm quite sure that Marshall, from the day he was born, had a general sense of the presence of God in the world. He probably never had any trouble grasping that one. But he was formed in Christian community where they tried to teach him the traditions and they taught him to trust in a God who loved him, in a community that loved him and that evoked his love. It brought forth his love so that this grumpy,

too-busy-for-anything Bishop whom he had never met, who'd barely even given permission for him to be confirmed, was beloved by him and he could love that man. He could love him in the name of Christ as Christ's representative. And not only that, he followed Jesus in his living and did the work of an evangelist. He lived out his baptismal vows. He shared with the people he lived with about this loving God and brought them with him into the community of the faithful.

This is the gift of knowing God. This is the gift of living the resurrected life with him.

Amen.