

November 15, 2015
Christian Experience: “Gifts from God”
1 Corinthians: 12:1-11, 27-31: Romans 12:1-8
David A. Renwick

In our sermons during this month we’re thinking together about experiencing God: not just knowing about God but actually knowing God: as if God were in the room with us, as if God were the house with us; as if God were in the office with us; as if God were in the school with us – knowing God as if God were close and our lives were interconnected.

This is an important distinction to make: between knowing *about God* and knowing God *directly*. Sometimes as Presbyterians we stop with knowing *about God* as if that were enough, as if that were sufficient. So we say, “Well I know a lot about God, I know doctrine, I know church history, I know what’s in the Bible!” And this is wonderful: to know about these things. But *knowing about* these things is not the same as knowing the one who is at the center of these things: knowing the one who is at the center of history, the one who is at the center of doctrine, or the one who is the center at the center of the Bible.

We can *know about* certain people but never really know them. We can know, for example, about Washington or Lincoln or Jefferson but we don’t know them, and they don’t know us. We could have read all about them all our lives. We may feel as if we know them, but we still don’t know them because we’ve never met them. Our lives have never intersected as they do with those who are living.

But when it comes to God, one of the things we read of in Scripture is that God is not content with us just to know about God. Rather, what God wants is for us to know God, and God wants to know us: he calls us, summons us, directly. He’s passionate that we know God.

In fact, when Jesus defines eternal life in John’s Gospel in the 17th Chapter (17:3) he does so in terms not just of going to heaven when you die, as if to say “this is eternal life that you go to heaven when you die.” Of course that’s part of it, part of the good news – that this life is not all there, but there is more to come, a time when all the things we don’t understand in life will be resolved; when what we see “through a glass dimly” (1 Corinthians 13) will become clear. This is the good gospel hope. But when Jesus defines eternal life in John Chapter 17 he defines it in terms of *knowing God*, now as well as for all eternity. This is what he says: “This is eternal life, that they know thee, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” This is eternal life, this is God’s passion for us, to have the best life possible now and for all eternity, and it involves knowing someone: knowing God. Not just about God but knowing God directly.

So we have been called to have this experience of God which leads to knowing God. We’ve been called to meet God, to find God in such a way that our lives connect with this God and our

knowledge about God becomes blended into a knowledge of God as one with whom we relate and with whom our lives are intertwined.

So last Sunday as we thought about this we thought about how it is that we meet God, and where it is that we meet God. Are there special places where we can meet God more readily or more intimately than in other places so we can actually come to know God? We asked that question last Sunday and what we discovered is this: that in the Bible, the fundamental truth about God, that God is everywhere, is not the whole truth! It IS true! Our doctrine is right, what we call the omnipresence of God – God is everywhere. But when you read the Bible carefully, what you discover is that God wants to be found in some places more than in others, and that there are some places spoken of very clearly in Scripture where our lives really can intersect with God in such a way that we can actually come to know God.

- So Jesus says, for example (Matthew 18:20), “Where two or three are gathered together, I am there.” Well he’s everywhere. Yes. But he’s especially there when there’s a party, when people come together. He’s especially there when we get together as a church – as we do today. He gives to us a promise that he is here when we gather in his name: you should come to worship every Sunday, and I should come to worship every Sunday, with his huge expectation that we will encounter God, and that God will encounter us; and something is missing if we do not have that experience when we come together to worship. The promise has been given. And we need to claim it, and sense the presence of God in a powerful life-transforming way in our Sunday gatherings.
- We meet God as well, says Jesus, when we serve and care together. If you were to ask Jesus where he could be found, he would say, in part, at least (Matthew 26:31-46): “I’m going to be found with the poor and the lonely, the stranger and the hungry, the naked and those in prison.” People, for example, might say “Where is God, especially with, for example, the recent bombings in Paris?” To which Jesus would say God is there. He is there with those who are suffering and who are weak, and with those who do not know what is coming next. And so he says to us, “You want to find me? Well, choose to be in those places where I intend to be! See that person with need? Go there and you will meet me. I’m ahead of you, I’m already there! When you go to those kinds of places, when you care and when you serve.
- And when we teach about Jesus as our Sunday school teachers are doing today (and every Sunday); when we build the church – Jesus promises to be there, too. The last words in Matthew's gospel (28:20) are these: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of time.” Sometimes we read these words and say “Well, that's wonderful!” and we think no more about it; it seems such a casual, everyday, no-brainer, promise. But actually it’s a very particular and powerful promise. Let me re-set the context to create the right emphasis. Jesus is saying, “Listen, at those times when you go into the world and make disciples, when you are about my business, I am especially with you, alongside you, helping you! When you teach people all my commandments; I am with you! When you baptize “in the name of the

Father Son and Holy Spirit,” when you build my church, I’m in the thick of things, I’m right there.

So if you do those things, if you commit yourselves to playing your part in building the church, choosing to live a community-oriented and not just a solitary faith, coming together, worshiping, serving and caring, being in those places where maybe nobody wants to be and where God seems to be absent, doing those things that nobody else volunteers to do – Jesus says “I’m there. I can be found everywhere but, you can find me, will find me, there in particular.

That’s what we looked at last Sunday. But that leads us to another question, which follows almost automatically, this: that if God wants me to know God, not just know about God; if God wants me to meet God, to have my life intersect with God, and if I have some inkling as to where I might find God:

- How do I know that I’ve actually met God when I’m there?
- What are the experiences that we are to have of God which are valid evidence of a genuine experience of God?
- What experiences point to the fact that we can say confidently, “Ah, I did meet God, I really did, and God met with me? Our lives intersected and I came to know God better than I’ve known God before.”

Sometimes we actually need to approach the answer to these questions by turning them around, and approach them from a negative angle, asking what experiences are “not necessarily necessary” to demonstrate that we really have met with God. This is important when we are scared that we actually never have really met God, or that our experience is in some way inadequate or false; or because someone has come to us and said, “Trust me, I can tell you exactly what the experiences are that you need to have that are proof that you have met God” – and then they give to us a list of spectacular experiences and leave us feeling hope-less rather than hope-filled; so we are left saying to ourselves, “Well I’ve never felt like that, I’ve never experienced that in my life. Maybe I’ve never met God or experienced God myself.” Some people, for example may say that “To know you have met God you need to see and experience certain miracles. You need to be present when they happen. You need to speak in some kind of ecstatic tongue, or have some enormous kind of a vision” – and that will be proof-conclusive that you have met God.

I don’t doubt for a moment that some people have those experiences. For the most part I don’t think I myself ever have, though, what I want to share this morning is that that really doesn’t bother me at all, nor negate the sense, one bit, that God has met with me often, and I with God. I say this with confidence because along with those glorious, powerful, spectacular experiences of God, the Scripture tells us that there are also some *ordinary but extraordinary ways of experiencing God* which are open to, and necessary for all of us, and that trump the spectacular!! That is, God works and is experienced through the miraculous to be sure, through the stunning and the marvelous, but God also works through the ordinary which we might miss as confirmation of the definite presence of God if we didn’t know what the Scripture said.

So Jesus, for example, in John's Gospel (14-16) is about to leave his disciples: he's going to die and they will no longer see him in flesh and blood; they've been experiencing the presence of God in flesh and blood in the person of Jesus, and he's going to leave them he says. But then he adds, I'll still be with you! In fact I'm going to send you the Holy Spirit – my ongoing presence.

The Holy Spirit, within the Trinity of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" is really the present manifestation or experience of the Father and the Son in our lives. When we speak about the Holy Spirit we're speaking about God's passion to be experienced, not just "thought about," but experienced in the world.

Jesus turns to his disciples and he says to them "I'll be sending you the Holy Spirit, and here are a couple of validations of my presence that you will come to know.

Ordinary Signs of the Presence of God: Jesus

Conviction of Weakness and Need. The first one is this: when the Holy Spirit comes you will have a profound conviction of sin, a profound conviction of your weakness and your own inability. This is what Jesus says (John 16:8): "*When the comforter (sometimes translated "advocate" or "helper" – all different names for the presence of God) comes, he will convict the world about sin and righteousness and judgment.*

Now this sounds like a bit of a downer: "When I experience God, I'll feel bad!" And it would be bad, except that the second part of the experience is that when the God comes and I experience God, I'll not only feel bad, but I'll feel bad enough to cry out to God for help: in some form, I'll say, "Lord, help me, I'm not strong enough to help myself!" And that cry – Well, that's the beginning of all kinds of change within our lives.

Throughout Scripture it's that cry to God which stirs things up. So, for example, in Exodus 3:7, God hears the cry for help from the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, in their despair, when it seems as if God is nowhere – but God is there . . . and his presence begins to change their lives. (see also, 2 Samuel 22:7, 2 Chronicles 6:19, Psalm 3:4, 34:6, etc.).

Remembering Jesus. This 'negative' conviction is a valid sense of the presence of God says Jesus, and so too is our memory about Jesus himself. When I leave you I've left you all of this teaching you're going to forget it unless I come by the Holy Spirit and I'll bring it to your mind; I'll remind you of what I've taught, John 16:13 – "*When the spirit of truth (= the presence of God) comes, he will guide you into all truth, he will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*"

There are days in which we just want to go our own way, but once we've learned something about Jesus, perhaps you've had this experience; there are times when we are simply not able to get Jesus out of our heart or mind. Jesus bothers us. It's an experience very closely related to our consciences bothering us! But it's more personal – we cannot forget the teaching of Jesus though we try to head in a different direction. It's as if he is there to pester us, and say "Now, remember what I said!" As if he is were present, speaking, saying, "Remember what I taught. Keep it in mind. This is your path in life; this is the best path."

Perhaps you've experienced that. That is a sign of the presence of God, of God at work within our lives. Some of you may have had, or you remember someone else having, those little wrist bands with "WWJD" on them: "What Would Jesus Do?" Well the Holy Spirit is, in a sense, that WWJD bracelet, reminding us of what Jesus would say and do! Pushing us to ask, personally, "Jesus what would you do? Jesus I remember what you said, let me follow what you said."

These are valid, signs or experiences, says Jesus, the kind of signs and experiences every follower of Christ should have, of God's presence.

Ordinary Signs of the Presence of God: Jesus

When we move on to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, we can find him mentioning at least three signs of God's presence which are ordinary but extraordinary.

Change in Our Sense of Allegiance. In I Corinthians 12:3, Paul speaks about God's Spirit (God's presence) changing our sense of allegiance, or our sense of authority. If I were to ask you, "Who has authority over your life?" How would you answer? Do you have? It's your life! Will you hand over that authority to another? Will you give it to Jesus? The apostle Paul raises this issue by making the following statement: "*No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.*" Or to put it positively: one the task of the Holy Spirit, the presence of God, is to help us say "Jesus is Lord."

Now this may seem to be trivial: surely anybody can say the phrase 'Jesus is Lord'? Yes, but not when we take it seriously.

- 'Lord,' for example, is the Old Testament word for God himself! Paul is saying that only God himself can bring us to the conclusion that Jesus is not merely a great teacher, but his teaching has divine authority because he is actually God.
- 'Lord' was also the Roman word for the authority of the Emperor: Caesar was 'Lord,' which means that he was the ultimate boss with absolute control over life. Nobody, says Paul, can say this of Jesus and mean it unless God is at work.

Nobody freely let's go of their life, hands over authority, unless God is at work. This is a powerful change in our lives that only God's presence can 'urge' and accomplish. The closest thing I can find to this on a human level has to do with joining the military. If you're an officer you took this oath:

I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same, and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me according to the regulations and the uniform code of military justice so help me God.

This is a powerful promise. This is saying that I will give to the President and those officers ‘appointed over me’ power over my life, to direct what I do, even at the risk of my life. We don’t do that lightly.

When it comes to God and Jesus, what the Scriptures say is that we cannot do that or say that by ourselves (we are too self-centered, too insecure) but we must do so – because this is the truth which truly leads to the best life: Jesus IS Lord! For this truth to become real to us (as I know it has for some if not most of us here today) God needs to be present, and at work, shepherding us through this simple but powerful ‘handing over of power,’ giving it away to another, whom we have begun to trust knows more about our lives than we do, and can direct our lives better than we can ourselves.

A Sense of Attachment, Family and Belonging. Changing allegiance and authority – that’s the work of the Holy Spirit. So, too, is changing a sense of attachment and family, a sense of belonging in a world in which there is so much loneliness and isolation. We may be surrounded by people, but all the evidence is that people feel more lonely than ever (see, for example, *American Sociological Review*, June, 2006). The apostle Paul writes to the Christians in Rome (8:15) and he says

“We did not receive a spirit of slavery (an experience of God that left us feeling as if we were slaves) but a spirit of adoption when we cry ‘Abba, Father’ (‘Abba’ is Aramaic, Jesus’ language, for ‘daddy’) it is that very spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (. . . that we really, really, really are children of God.) That is, yes, it’s true, anybody can call God “Father,” say “Our Father who art in Heaven,” but for that to become real, and to know it’s the absolute bedrock truth of our life – that can only happen when God is present and at work; a critical experience of God.

In Romans 8, Paul calls the presence of God the “spirit of adoption.” Tracy Hill and her husband Scott Hill adopted two girls, two sisters, when they were older, and they were passionate that these two sisters would become a part of the family, and that the sisters call them ‘mom’ and ‘dad’. To begin with, however, this was not happening, which made life complicated. They certainly did not want to force the issue, so that the words would be said but not felt. If the words were to be used at all, they wanted them to be “real.” And this is how they describe how it happened.

After about four months [out of the blue] our oldest daughter asked me if she and her sister could call us mom and dad. I was so excited. Holding back, I told her that we would love them to call us mom and dad, but they could call as anything they were comfortable with. To which she replied “Thanks Tracy!” Approximately a month after that incident, as I was kissing the girls good night, they looked at each other and said together “1, 2, 3, Goodnight mommy.” Next morning I waited to hear the word ‘mom’ again, but my bubble was burst after they said the usual, “Thanks for the breakfast, Tracy!” But over the next couple of months things began to change. They would occasionally call me mom, as if trying

it on for size. And by the time we'd been together for six months, almost all the time we had become mom and dad.

[<https://www.bcadoption.com/> “What’s in a Name? Waiting to Be Called “Mom” and “Dad.”]

That is, in time, the girls knew it was really, really true – they belonged, that their lives were no connected to Tracy and Scott; they knew this not only about each other (sisters by blood) but they knew this about their parents (parents by adoption). And this was new, and transformative. . . “We did not receive a spirit of slavery, says Paul, but a spirit of adoption. When we cry ‘Abba, Father,’ it is the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are [I mean we really are] children of God.” You really are my brothers and sisters. God is not just far away out there, God is truly parent, daddy, close by. Only God’s presence can convince us of this, and make it real. An ordinary experience, yet truly extraordinary!

A Sense of Abilities and Gifts Given by God to be Used. And then finally, in the third place, the apostle Paul speaks about the fact that when the spirit is present we have a sense that we have abilities and gifts given to us by God that are to be used by God for the common good.

In his writings, Paul mentions four lists of these gifts; they are not meant to be exclusive or final but just suggestions of the kinds of gifts that God gives to his people; gifts and abilities to every single follower of Jesus Christ; gifts and abilities without exception.

1 Corinthians 12:7-11

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

- *wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, various kinds of tongues, the interpretation of tongues.*

All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

1 Corinthians 12:27-28

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church

- *apostles, prophets, teachers; deeds of power, gifts of healing, forms of assistance (helping!), leadership, tongues.*

Romans 12:4-8

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:

- *the prophet (the proclaimer of God's word), the deacon (servant), the teacher, the exhorter; the giver; the leader; the compassionate person*

Ephesians 4:11-12

The gifts God gave were that some would be

- *apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,*
to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ

We have been given these gifts to use for God and for the common good every one of us.

Some of these gifts, I have to say, are “spectacular” – like *healing, tongues, apostleship*. But as you look through all the lists you’ll find there are plenty of ordinary ones as well, ordinary but extraordinary and vital: *wisdom, faith, administration, leadership, teaching*, and the one I like the most, *assistance*. The King James Version of the Bible calls this gift “the gift of helps.” It’s so simple really, the gift of ‘helps’ is just the willingness to ask “How can I help?”

I cannot begin to tell you how important that phrase has been when people in different churches have said that to me: “How can I help?” They may have no spectacular gift, but their very presence and their willingness to ask the question have been powerful in my life at various times.

And when other people share with me about some troubles they have faced, and I say “Well what happened to you, how did you get through the tough times?” The answer is often, “Well somebody came up and gave me help.” In fact, I’ve often found that the same person often turns up as the helper, again and again. These ‘helpers’ usually do not know that they have the gift but they do! What gift they say? Well it’s just that they turn up! They turn up at the right time in the right place! And they offer themselves with the question, “What can I do to help?” In fact, it would be fair to say that they themselves are often the gift. God has made their lives a gift to others. They are the gift their life to others in somebody's time of need.

I believe this gift of ‘helps’ is one of the gifts God’s presence has given to Gary Haugen. In the 1990’s Gary Haugen was an attorney with the US Department of Justice. He was assigned to a United Nations investigation of the genocide in Rwanda, and when he saw the awful things that human beings could do to one another when there was no rule of law, when there was nobody to enforce the law. There was no one to stop the abuse of power. The powerful ruled over the weak, taking over their lives, controlling their lives, sometimes taking, sometimes enslaving their lives. I’m not sure about the details as to when and how exactly it happened, but at some point Gary began to ask himself and God, “How can I help? He was an attorney, how could he use his training and help? He had come to know people in the International community, how could this help? He knew about the running of every branch of the criminal justice system, how can he use this knowledge to help?

[see <https://ijm.org/bios/gary-haugen?gclid=CLfh0d6btMkCFQEoHwodcDwBBw>]

With the training and experience he had, not with “spectacular gifts” but who he was offered to God, he put together an organization called the International Justice Mission (IJM). From 2012 to 2015, thirteen thousand officials and law enforcement officers in different countries around the world have been trained to enforce the laws of their land, especially to help women and girls who've been enslaved. Thirteen thousand, through the passion to use his experience and training to “help.” How can I help? And in 2014 in India alone, through IJM over 2500 people, mainly women and children were freed from slavery.

One person experiencing God and saying “How can I help?” That’s the gift of “helps” or “assistance.”

You can have that experience too. The result may not be the same, but in its own way it will be just as powerful a validating sign of God's presence.

God calls us not just to know *about God* but to know God, directly; to know a God who can be found in intimate ways, in expected and unexpected places – in places mentioned clearly in Scripture.

- A God whose presence prods our consciences until we say “help me.”
- A God who reminds us of Jesus (sometimes at times it would be more convenient to forget him!)
- A God who creates a sense of allegiance in our lives to Jesus, as the one authority in our life who knows best what our life is about
- A God who changes our sense of attachment and brings us into his family;
- A God who gives to us abilities and gifts, some spectacular but most ordinary, that he can take and use to be his arms and feet his hands his eyes in this world that he loves and to which he sent his son.

We have been invited everyone to receive eternal life now forever – but now and forever this involves an invitation to know God. I hope you've accepted that invitation. If not, today is the day to accept! And if so, I hope that these validations of God’s presence will encourage you to know God more and more. This is eternal life, said Jesus, to know God, and to know me! May this be our eternal experience.

Let us pray; Lord we thank you for your grace within our lives and for your passion to know us and for us to know you. Help us to know that this is a path of abundant and eternal life and to accept your offer every day in which we have breath. Amen.

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4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800