

You Are Fully Known and Deeply Loved

Titus 3:3-4

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What is it that we really need to know from God?

Last week I went to a retreat for Baptist pastors from Massachusetts and Rhode Island led by a Mainer named Peter Panegore. He began with a story about how he died and encountered God. It was 30 years ago, but that experience had determined the course of his life from then on.

Peter grew up both Catholic and Greek Orthodox, made to go to classes by parents who could never agree on religion. He was an outdoors guy and a skier, so he decided to go to college at Montana State. During a break, he went with another student ice-climbing in the Canadian Rockies, going up a sheer vertical face covered with ice. He fell, and that is how we died—for a little while. He was 20 years old.

When his head and chest smashed against the ice, Peter says he left his body. He could look down and see it, and much of his story was like other near-death experiences you've heard about. But what was striking was what Peter experienced once he came into the light. He did not see God. Rather, he knew that God saw him. He understood that for the first time he was fully known. He was shown all the pain that he had caused others through his life—intentionally and unintentionally. But he understood that in spite of this he was forgiven. The God who fully knew him also deeply loved him.

But then Peter heard his climbing buddy calling him back and saw him shaking his body. For a brief time Peter negotiated with God about whether he could go back and finish his life, and when God said yes, Peter felt that he was sucked back into his body and opened his eyes, without any idea where he was. But he remembered everything that had happened. He understood that he was fully known and deeply loved. It took him 20 years before he “came out of the closet” and told people about his encounter with God, but that encounter led him to Yale Divinity School and into a ministry in UCC churches in coastal Maine—and now on television and the internet.

What is it, then, that we really need to know from God? That we are fully known and deeply loved.

That turns out to be the right story for Reformation Sunday. We remember today that Martin Luther on October 31 posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church, challenging the practice and theology of the Roman church. We remember that he called us back to the basics, back to the original text of the New Testament, back to Paul's doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Last year I gave more of a history lesson on this Sunday, but this year I want you to identify with one man's struggle to find the assurance that he was accepted by God.

Martin Luther did not begin his career as a radical. He was ordained as a priest and served as an Augustinian monk who taught scripture to others at the monastery. But all his life Martin was plagued by feelings of unworthiness. He knew he was a sinner, and how could he be sure that his sins were forgiven. If they were not, he was doomed. He could not stand in the presence of God. When he celebrated his first mass after his ordination he was so overwhelmed that he fell down on the floor in a seizure. Martin would bother the other monks to death, going several times a day to confession, noting every action and every motive that could be sinful and asking for forgiveness.

Martin's problem was not that he misunderstood the theology of the church. His problem was that he had a tender conscience and an inability to ignore his own shortcomings. The system in which he had been trained understood grace—God's love and forgiveness—to be something that had been

entrusted to the institutional church. It was like a fluid that flowed down from heaven in a great main and then was distributed to humans from seven spigots called the seven sacraments, one of them being the sacrament of confession. It was the church that was charged to administer that sacrament, to turn the spigot on and off, and give forgiveness to people. The only way we humans have been given, Martin had been taught, was to seek forgiveness from the church. But for Martin there was no end to seeking forgiveness. There could be no assurance. What if he sinned again before he could go to confession? He would go to hell. And even if the church forgave him, how could he be sure that God forgave him? God seemed to him to demand perfection.

But then Martin began to read the New Testament in a careful way. He was a scholar preparing lectures not from the Vulgate in Latin, but from the original Greek texts, and he tried to read them in a fresh way, not with all the preconceptions of church teaching. It was teaching the letters of Paul that was Luther's downfall, or his salvation. You can read his lectures on Galatians and on Romans and see this growing awareness. It hits him with full force when he comes to understand what Paul means by "the righteousness of God"—which had always been translated as "the justice of God." The righteousness of God, Paul says in Romans, is demonstrated by what God did in giving Jesus to die for us on the cross. What is shown on the cross is not that God is just—almost the opposite. What is shown on the cross is that God's righteousness, which exceeds human righteousness, is his mercy. "God's righteousness" can also be translated as God's justifying us, God's way of making us right with himself. And that is done by God's free act, God forgiving us not because we are good enough but because he loves us. God's love is demonstrated in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

As Luther read those words in Paul, something inside him broke free. God was not a demanding and condemning parent. Being saved from judgment was not something that Martin had to work out for himself. He had already been forgiven. He had already been saved. He was already accepted by God. The recovery of that Good News was what the Reformation was all about.

We cannot tell the story of Martin Luther as though it were the story of an academic discovery in an ancient text or as though it were the triumph of reason over superstition. The real story is that he encountered God. He encountered God in the Bible, yet, but not in an intellectual way but in a personal way. At some point as he thought about the text God's Spirit touched him and said to him, "Martin, you are already forgiven, you have been saved, you are accepted."

There are many texts in the New Testament that teach this, and we read several of them together already. I want to call your attention to the first verse we read from Titus 3:3-4. This is one of those passages in the pastoral letters about which the writer says "This is a trustworthy saying." In every case the saying has to do with the core of the gospel and refers to a passage that the author is quoting, as if the lines would be familiar to a church audience. In this case it may be that these verses from Titus are being quoted from a liturgy associated with baptism. Listen to these words again. I'm reading from the New Living Translation, which I think gets the Greek just right:

When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

That, friends, is the gospel. The coming of Jesus into the world—and especially his death on the cross—is the revealing of God's true nature. The Jesus story is the revelation of God's kindness. Kindness! That's what God is really like—kind! Even stronger, we can say that the Jesus story reveals God's love. The Greek word for love, here, though is *philanthropy*, his love for humans, not just love in the abstract. When God revealed his kindness and love on the cross, he saved us right then and there. The gospel does not tell you how to be saved; it tells you that you have been saved by what God already did. He saved us not because we ever did anything to make ourselves good enough to be spared God's judgment, but only because of his mercy. The message is that although we have caused much pain to

God and to others—the letter to Titus says that we were full of evil and envy and hated people—nevertheless we are fully loved.

We talk about someone coming to faith in Christ or being born again, but we are not talking about something you *do*. We mean that somehow you felt that you encountered God’s reality, and you felt in your heart that God knew you and loved you in spite of anything you had done.

Everybody in this room who has joined our church has said, at least privately, that they had an experience like that. We don’t talk enough about that. When a person wakes up and says, “Oh my God, I *am* loved and forgiven” it’s always “a God thing.” And church ought to be a place where it’s safe to talk about such things. Peter Panegore, who has pastored UCC churches of Maine Yankees, says that what we need in mainline churches is to create spaces where people can tell their stories about God—and not feel that someone will think they are crazy or sentimental or gullible.

In Vacation Bible School the past two years, one section of the program is called “God sightings.” The children share ways they have seen God or seen God at work in the past day. That’s what most varieties of Baptists call “testimonies.” Testimonies ought to be a part of every worship service. When I ask for joys and concerns I am also asking for testimonies. If God spoke to you this week, or if “a God thing” happened in your life, God wants you to share it with others, because it encourages all of us in our faith.

I never died and came back like Peter. I did tell people at the retreat, though, that story I have shared with you about how I could easily have died when I was electrocuted, and how it made me focus on knowing Christ. But as I told that story I thought about the college student who probably saved my life by yanking the electrical cord out of my hand when I couldn’t let go.

More than 20 years after that incident, I was going through a very difficult time in my church. I had critics who wanted to get rid of me. I was wondering if my preaching and teaching made any difference at all. Out of the blue I got an email from Mike Caro. He was the student who saved my life. He told me that during the year after that, he decided to go the fraternity route, became a heavy drinker, and pretty much messed up his life. But much later he had come back to the Christian life and was now a pastor, a church planter in the Midwest. He had been thinking about people who made a real difference in his life, and he could only think of 2 or 3. He wanted me to know that I was one. I had been his campus minister and although he had wandered away and I thought I had failed, what I showed him about Christ made a difference.

I cried when I got that email. And I was sure it was a God thing. How could Mike, whom I hadn’t heard from in 20 years, know that I needed encouragement? God knew what I needed. Later, Mike passed through Cincinnati and we had a reunion in person.

But not long after that email, I was telling that story to someone in my office when my phone rang. It was David Smith, calling from Jerusalem. He was another young guy I had as a student in Alabama, and I hadn’t seen him in years, since he had a layover at JFK on his way to Israel with his wife as missionaries. Now he had tracked me down in Kentucky and he was calling just to say how much I had meant to him as a student and how I was one of the reasons he was serving among Palestinians today. Did David get some scuttlebutt about my being in trouble at my church? No, it was God’s way of reminding me: You are fully known and deeply loved.

Not too long after that—during the same period of turmoil—a retired couple came to tell me that a lot of people were unhappy with me and were going to leave the church. They had some areas of disagreement with me, but what they really came to hit me with was this: “You’re just not a good pastor. You just don’t have any compassion.” That went about as deep as a wound could go, which is what they wanted. Am I totally wrong about who I think I am? Do I come across as an uncaring jerk? No compassion?

I left my office, literally shaking, and went to run some errands before going home. I stopped in the CVS to get some batteries. As I stooped down to look at the battery display below a counter, someone tapped me on the shoulder. "Are you the pastor at Latonia Baptist?"

I turned around and saw a stranger all dressed in black, with a scruffy beard. "Yes, I am. Can I help you with something?"

"Oh, no," he said. "I watch your sermons on TV and I just wanted to tell you that you are the most compassionate person I have ever heard. And I often think to myself, I bet those people don't know what they've got." Now what are the chances that this stranger was listening through my office door and knew exactly what I needed to hear?

I went to the grocery next, and as I came around a corner there was the man in black. "Well," he said, laughing, "I guess I'm you're angel!" I don't know about that, but I know that he was sent from God. God wanted to remind me: You are fully known and deeply loved. And so are you.