

“Knowing the World Within”
John 2:23-25
April 28, 2019
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
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Our Scripture reading this morning is from the Gospel of John, chapter two, verses twenty-three through twenty-five. Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

^{2:23} Now when he [that is, Jesus,] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

This is the word of the Lord.

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, your hands have made and fashioned us;
give us understanding that we may learn your commandments,
that we your people might rejoice together,
as we see the work that you are doing in each of us.
Let your steadfast love comfort us,
according to your promises.
Work now in our hearts, to conform them to your word,
that we may not be put to shame,
but might delight in you.
Teach us from your word now, we ask,
in Jesus’s name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:73, 74, 76, 80]

Our text this morning is a brief one – just three verses.

But it points us to a profound reality that we will spend some time reflecting on together.

Jesus performed signs in his time in Jerusalem, while he was there for that first Passover during his public ministry. We’re not told by John what those signs were.

But we are told in verse twenty-three that “many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.”

So: Many believed in his name! This is good news, right? This is exactly what we were told by the Apostle John, just one chapter earlier, that Jesus’s goal was. In John 1:12 we read: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” Here we read that “many believed in his name” – this is the goal, right? Mission accomplished!

Well ... not exactly. In verse twenty-four we read “But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them”

Why not?

Some have argued that the problem was that their faith was based on the signs they saw – that this indicated a deficiency in their faith. [Carson, 184]

The problem with that is that just a few verses earlier, after the miracle at Cana we are told that Jesus performed his first sign, and that it was after seeing the sign that his disciples believed in him ... which is the same pattern described here. The problem does not seem to be the role that the signs played in faith. [Michaels, 174-175]

If that wasn't the problem, though, then what was?

Well, there is nothing in the external description of their faith that suggests there was a problem with it. Nothing on the surface pointed to a problem.

Instead, we are told in verse twenty-five that Jesus "himself knew what was in man."

The external looked just right. But Jesus knew the heart. And in the heart, there was a problem.

Just how big a problem there was we are not actually told. Some commentators assert that the faith described here is false and "spurious" [Carson, 184]. Others describe it as a right step, but still only a first step [Morris, 206]. Others refer to it as an "intermediary" faith that is still "unsatisfactory" [Brown, 127], while still another argues that "Nothing in the text suggests that the faith of these Passover 'believers' was anything but genuine" but "genuine though it may be," it is still "not sufficient to identify them as those 'born of God'" [Michaels, 173]

We know there was something deficient in their faith. But the fact is that where their faith lay on the spectrum that stretches out with false faith on one end, and genuine but immature faith on the other, we simply are not told.

What I want to focus on this morning though, is that distinction between the external and the internal. *That* is the hinge of our text. The incongruity between them in those described is the key point of our text.

Because while Jesus was not satisfied with the faith described in our text ... I think many of us would have been. Many of us would have been thrilled to find many believing in Jesus at that first Passover, and we would have been perplexed when Jesus was less than enthusiastic.

And that brings us to what I think is one of the key points of our text: We are far too easily content with external compliance, when Christ desires heart-level embrace.

We tend to focus on the external – the actions, the words, the surface-level thoughts, even. But Christ, we see here, is aimed at something much deeper. Christ is interested with whether we have embraced him in the depths of our hearts.

This morning I want to spend some time thinking together about those two arenas.

I should say off the bat that of course external compliance matters. I am not disparaging external compliance with what is good and right or putting a wall up between external compliance and heart-level realities. Quite the opposite – they are to be united, not divided.

But we can tend to focus on one over the other. And quite often we are content with external compliance when we should be pursuing heart-level embrace.

And I think we have this tendency both when it comes to ourselves and when it comes to others.

But before we look at that more closely, I want to suggest at least one reason why we prefer to focus on the realm of the external over that of the heart.

External words and deeds, along with surface-level thoughts, are familiar territory for most of us. It can seem straightforward and clear-cut: we know what we should do, we know what we shouldn't do, we know when we've done well and when we've done wrong. It's safe and straightforward.

Compared with the external, the heart, the inner-world inside each one of us, is often scary and uncharted territory.

One of my favorite quotes for a Christian understanding of the inner-world of a human being comes from Saint Augustine. In Book IV of his *Confessions* he writes, "A human being is an immense abyss, but you, Lord, keep count even of his hairs, and not one of them is lost to you; yet even his hairs are easier to number than the affections and movements of his heart." [Augustine, Book IV, 14, 22 (p. 106)]

"A human being is an immense abyss [...] even his hairs are easier to number than the affections and movements of his heart."

An abyss is a scary thing to try to navigate and explore. And so, often we leave it alone ... we avoid it ... whether it's our abyss or someone else's – we leave it to itself and stick instead to the externals – to the surface level.

David Brooks gets at the same idea when he writes that "There [...] [is] a cosmic universe in every person." [Brooks, 235]

That is a beautiful thing to say and to ponder ... it is a terrifying thing to try to navigate, whether in your own soul or someone else's.

We often cope with this in one of two ways.

One is to just ignore the internal world – to functionally deny its existence, whether we'd formally deny it or not. We act as if that immense abyss, that cosmic universe, does not exist in us or in others. We stick to the external world of our actions, words, and surface thoughts. That's one coping mechanism.

Another coping mechanism is to deny the complexity of the inner world by adopting helpful but very simplistic maps ... and then acting as if they are exhaustive.

Some versions of Christian counseling or Christian self-help can be guilty of this ... and many more times, when the counseling or the books themselves are not guilty of this, *we* can be guilty of misusing them this way. The book or counseling perspective maps out some truths about the human heart and mind, and about patterns of sin, and then either the resource itself or we treat that map as if it is an exhaustive picture of the human heart. And soon we have reduced every

human action, every struggle, every sin, every difficulty, we have reduced them all to a small handful of problems: idolatry, fear of man, something else. And with that map in hand we act as if we understand the human heart. Augustine claimed the hairs on a person's head are easier to number than the affections and movements of his heart. We can be tempted to believe that we can summarize the affections and movements of the human heart in an easy-to-follow diagram. When we do that, either we are right, or Augustine is right ... and I tend to bet on Augustine.

We are often tempted to ignore the internal world – both in ourselves and in others. And when we do acknowledge it, we are tempted to oversimplify it, in one way or another.

But scary though it may be, the reality is that “A human being is an immense abyss [...] [and] even his hairs are easier to number than the affections and movements of his heart.” “There [...] [is] a cosmic universe in every person.”

And that is reflected in our brief text this morning. The text somehow seems to tell us that these people were both in belief and in unbelief. It doesn't simplify the picture for us. They believed in his name, but Jesus could not entrust himself to them. There was something complicated going on – something that cannot be easily reduced to a set of external facts or a simple internal flow-chart.

“A human being is an immense abyss.” And we cannot expect to fully comprehend that immense abyss that is the internal world.

But we are reminded in our text that key matters of eternal life and death reside there – reside in the heart ... and so we have a calling to attend to and pursue what is going on there. We have a calling to seek not just external lives that conform to Christ's commands, but internal lives that embrace him from the heart.

Our text reminds us that we are far too easily content with external compliance when we should be pursuing heart-level embrace.

What does that look like?

Let's consider it first for ourselves, and then in our relationship with others.

So first, in our own lives, we are far too easily content with external compliance when we should be pursuing heart-level embrace.

We are content with external compliance when we should be pursuing self-knowledge.

John Calvin begins book one of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with these words: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”

The pastor B. W. Maturin, in 1905 began his work titled *Self-Knowledge and Self-Discipline* with similar words. He said “There are two spheres of knowledge in which every one who is endeavouring after any growth in the spiritual life must be making some advance. The knowledge of God and the knowledge of self.” (3).

Maturin then goes on for the first chapter of his book to discuss just how difficult self-knowledge really is.

I want to read a fairly long passage from Maturin – I hope that’s okay. (And one I’ve read at a Women’s Ministry of Faith event before – sorry!) But he makes the point so well that he is worth hearing (and even worth hearing a second time).

He writes:

“There are few things more surprising, when we come to think of it, than our ignorance of ourselves, nay, more than ignorance, for ignorance only means failure in knowledge, but we go beyond that, for we are, many of us, not only ignorant of a great part of our own character, but we often imagine ourselves to be quite different from what we are. It seems almost impossible that it should be so, did we not know it to be only too true.

“How is it possible for a man to close his eyes to the most patent and pressing facts connected with himself, involving the gravest consequences, which are perfectly evident to every one except himself? We are often amused by hearing others giving their opinions of themselves and their gifts and powers. We are amused, sometimes amazed, that their estimate is so utterly different from what those who have but a very slight knowledge of them can see at a glance to be the true one. We hear people boast of gifts that every one except themselves know they do not possess, or on the other hand men of great powers and influence tormented with an almost morbidly low estimate of their capacity. [/] And yet we do not consider that perhaps we too are as completely mistaken in our judgment of ourselves. Most of us have known in some time of our lives what it was to be accused of some fault in our character which we repudiated at the time with indignation begotten of the sincere conviction that the accusation was untrue, and yet perhaps years afterwards we found ourselves mistaken and that the criticism was correct. How is it possible that such a thing should be? Listen to two friends discussing and criticizing one another, what is more common than the tone of protest or repudiation with which some fault or some virtue is discussed, and yet do we not feel naturally inclined to say, ‘Surely the man must know himself better than his friend can know him, if he says he hasn’t that gift or fault who can know whether he has or not better than himself?’ We do not say this [though,] because experience has proved to us how often the critic is right and that in many cases a man is the worst judge of himself.

“Indeed, one may have a very deep knowledge of human character in general, and yet be profoundly ignorant of one’s own character. We look with the same eyes, yet the eyes that pierce so easily through the artifices and deceptions of others become clouded and the vision disturbed when they turn inwards and examine oneself. And moreover, it is to be remembered that self-knowledge has nothing to do with mere cleverness or intellectual insight, but is largely if not entirely moral.

[He goes on (and remember he was writing in 1905!) – but he goes on:] “When we consider how intensely self-conscious is the age in which we live, and the amount of time that most people spend upon themselves one way or another, what an absorbingly interesting study is that of the human heart, and all the more interesting when it is one’s own, we are amazed that we are, nevertheless, most of us, so lacking in self-knowledge, that very often our latest acquaintance could tell us things about ourselves that we should refuse to believe, yet that are undoubtedly true.”

What is Maturin’s point? We do not know ourselves nearly as well as we think. And why is that a problem? It’s a problem because self-knowledge is a necessary ingredient in spiritual growth. It’s a problem because Christ is not content with external compliance, but desires that we embrace him at the level of the heart. And so, we need to be able to navigate our own hearts ... or at least be willing to explore them in order to nurture an embrace of Christ at the heart-level.

But instead we are often content with external compliance in our own lives.

In some cases, we are far too *self-satisfied* with our external compliance. It has been a certain number of days or weeks since we have committed this or that sinful action. We have kept up our spiritual disciplines for so many days. We have done this or that act of service for a few weeks. And we quickly become self-satisfied with our spiritual lives. We stop paying attention to them. We assume all is well and we are lulled into complacency.

Or, on the other end, we are so focused on our lack of external compliance, our failures with the struggles we think we should be done with by now, that we fail to see the many other ways God has been at work in us – the ways he has grown and matured and sanctified us.

Our text tonight focuses on an incongruence between external compliance and internal realities – and serves as a reminder that we too often look only to the external in considering our own spiritual lives.

But Jesus tells us in our text that the internal reality is essential.

So how do we better get to know our own internal world – how do we begin to navigate the immense abyss, the cosmic universe, within?

There is a lot we could say here, and many Christians have considered the question. But we heard from B. W. Maturin earlier, so maybe we will look again to him for help, along with Saint Augustine.

Maturin tells us at least one thing to avoid, and four things to pursue.

First: What are we to avoid?

We are to avoid the belief that we know more about ourselves than we really do.

Maturin points out that sometimes the very truths we know about ourselves can blind us to other truths about ourselves. We may easily learn a few obvious and pronounced things about our own hearts ... but then we focus on those one or two things so much, as if by knowing them we have already grasped the whole picture, and as a result we miss the many, many other things going on in our inner world.

“The partial knowledge therefore that satisfies so many is in itself a very serious danger.” Maturin writes. “In some cases, the mind will dwell [...] upon some virtue which conceals from it a steady deterioration in other directions. [...] In other cases, it is not a virtue but a sin which blinds the soul to further knowledge of its true state. [...] The mind turns always to the same point, gauges all by that one sin, ‘*it is no worse than it was, therefore I am no worse; it is no better, therefore I am no better.*’”

We focus on just one or two things. We tell ourselves because we know those one or two things we know ourselves. And all the while, we are in ignorance about the state of most things in our heart. But because we believe we already know ourselves, we don’t even try to investigate those other regions of our heart. [Maturin, 22-26]

Assuming that we know more about ourselves than we actually do can be a major obstacle to growing in knowledge of the world within us, and we need to avoid that temptation.

That is what we are to avoid. What are we to pursue?

Let's briefly consider four things right now.

First, if we want to better grasp the world within ourselves, we need deep relationships with others.

We need those deep relationships first because we need other people to be able to speak into our lives. As we said earlier, it is striking how often someone else can see something about a person that the person cannot see about themselves – even at the level of the heart. So, we need people who can both see us, and who can speak to us of what they see.

But along with that, we also need people whose lives we can see close up, and whom we can compare our own lives with. It is often in seeing the strengths of others, acted out in real life, that we can begin to see our own internal weaknesses. And it is often in seeing the weaknesses of others that we can better grasp how God has gifted and strengthened us. [Maturin, 31-33]

So first: Do you have people in your life close enough to speak into your life – to see and to point out to you your blind-spots about yourself? And do you have people close enough to live as real examples before you?

Second: We need to question and examine ourselves. That should be obvious ... but it often isn't. We say or do or think or feel different things – good things or bad things – and we so rarely ask why. Why did we do that? Why did we say that? Why did we empathize here? Why did our temper flare up there? If we do not interrogate our thoughts and feelings, we will remain ignorant as to what is behind them – whether it is something good or bad. We need to question and examine ourselves.

Third, we need to allow ourselves – and maybe sometimes even force ourselves – to be challenged. When unlooked-for challenges come, we should welcome them, and then observe ourselves – observe how we respond. We don't go looking for difficulties at work, or added struggles with our kids, or unexpected health difficulties, or unanticipated financial strains. And we shouldn't go looking for those kinds of things. But when they come anyway, they are an opportunity to learn about ourselves. To observe how we respond – not just externally, but internally. What thoughts and feelings which normally stay hidden in the abyss of our hearts begin to poke their heads out, begin to come into sight?

And beyond that, there are ways we can *invite* challenges. Fasting, in various forms, is an example of that. We think we are such patient and kind people. Fast for a day. And see if it is true ... or if the simple withdrawal of food for a few more hours than normal on one day can lead all sorts of impatient and entitled emotions to emerge from the abyss in your heart.

If we want to grow in self-knowledge of what is in our hearts, we need to allow ourselves, and maybe even force ourselves, to be challenged sometimes.

Fourth, and finally – and this one is key – if we want to grow in knowledge of the world within us, we need to rely on a guide who knows the terrain better than we do.

This is, really, the central point of our text this morning. We so often need someone to bear witness to us about other people, if we are to understand them. As we have said, we often even

need other people to bear witness to us about *ourselves* if we are to understand ourselves! But ... we are told in verse twenty-five ... Jesus “needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”

Our self-examination, or attempts to explore the immense abyss within, cannot be done in the dark, but must be done in reliance on the light of the Lord. [Maturin, 34-37]

And so, Augustine could write not only that the human heart is an immense abyss, but in Book IV of his *Confessions* he could add that when we turn to our own hearts, and when we look there rightly, we find the Lord Jesus there. [Augustine, IV.12.19 (p. 104)]

Now ... this is not vague warm and fuzzy sentiment that Augustine is expressing in that line. It is a conviction that Jesus knows the terrain of our hearts far better than we do, and though we don't even feel consciously present ourselves in the depths of our hearts, *he is there*. It is a conviction that our text this morning is true – Jesus really does know what is within us.

And so, any such exploration must be done in reliance on him. *He* must be our guide. We are to pursue self-knowledge always in dependence on his word, in reliance on his Spirit, and immersed in prayer.

If we want to grow in knowledge of the world within us, we need to rely on a guide who knows the terrain better than we do – we need to rely on Jesus Christ.

Now ... all of this self-examination, all of this talk of exploring the immense abyss of the inner world within us ... all of this can begin to make some feel uncomfortable. It can sound to some to be self-centered ... even narcissistic.

And some *are* fascinated with themselves in a self-centered and narcissistic way. But that is not the kind of self-knowledge we have been talking about this morning.

Maturin reminds us – he says: “If there is to be any spiritual growth, there must be a growth in self-knowledge. We cannot make any serious attempt to conquer our sins till we know what they are.” [Maturin, 26]

We might add, we cannot make any serious attempts to build on the virtues the Holy Spirit is working to grow within us, if we do not know what those virtues are.

And similarly: we cannot make any serious attempt to heal and correct the wounds within us, if we refuse to discover what those wounds are.

It is true that a doctor that spends all her time running diagnostic tests and who never gets to the point of prescribing treatment and pursuing a cure, is a useless doctor. But at the same time, a doctor who refuses to examine the patient, who refuses to explore what is wrong, but who just starts writing prescriptions without knowing the real nature of the problem, that doctor is no better!

We are called to pursue active devotion to Christ from the heart. And pursuing such devotion requires knowing where our hearts are resistant, so that we can combat the resistance, knowing where we are strong, so we can make the most of those strengths, knowing where we are weak or wounded so we can nurture health and strength in those places.

In our own lives, we are far too easily content with external compliance when we should be pursuing heart-level embrace. And pursuing such heart-level embrace of Christ requires self-knowledge.

That is how our text relates to how we approach ourselves.

But what about how we are to approach others?

I would argue that not only with ourselves, but also with others we are far too easily content with external compliance when we should be pursuing heart-level realities.

I will be brief with these, but let me suggest some ways to think about our tendencies to do this in political relationships, personal relationships, and parental relationships.

First, in political relationships we are far too easily content with external compliance when we should be pursuing heart-level realities.

And I am using the word “political” in “political relationships” broadly: it includes national politics, sure, but more importantly I also mean church politics, office politics, politics within your social group. In any setting where people tend to break into tribes or factions.

In such settings we so often embrace simplistic external distinctions without pursuing heart-level realities. Everyone who externally supports my tribe is good, and everyone who opposes it is bad. This can lead us to entrust ourselves to members of our tribe who we really should not, and it can lead us to dehumanize and slander members of other tribes in ways that we really should not, because we reduce people to their external tribe and deny the complexity of their inner world and motivations. And so, we come to assume that everyone in *our* tribe is motivated by goodness and intelligence, while everyone in the other tribe is motivated by evil and stupidity.

If Jesus thought in those patterns, then those described in verse twenty-three would have been part of his tribe – they confessed to believe in him – and so he should have entrusted himself to them ... but he didn't. On a political level Jesus sees the complexity of other people – whether they appear to oppose him, or they appear to support him. We should do the same.

In all the different types of political relationships we can have, we far too easily embrace simplistic external distinctions without pursuing heart-level realities.

Next, in personal, or peer, relationships we are far too easily content with external agreeableness when we should be pursuing heart-level truths and connections.

In our friendships, it is striking how often we are content with relationships where we have maybe a few mutual interests, where we generally enjoy each other's company, and where we are all careful not to bother each other too much.

So often we are content with superficial friendships.

And some friendly relationships are superficial, to be sure. But *true* friendships should surely go beyond external agreeableness and extend to heart-level realities. We should note how not only in this morning's text but throughout the Gospels, Jesus is never satisfied with external niceties and agreeableness. He is always focusing on the heart-level realities.

Do you have friendships like that ... or do they tend to be more external and superficial?

Do you have a marriage like that ... or does your marriage tend to be more external and superficial?

How can you pursue deeper relationships that connect to heart-level realities with the people whom God has put in your life? How can you strive to relate to those around you the way Jesus related to those around him?

In personal, or peer, relationships we are far too easily content with external agreeableness when we should be pursuing heart-level issues.

Finally, in *parental relationships* we can be overly focused on or content with external compliance when we should be pursuing heart-level realities. And here again we might think of the term “parental” broadly to include actual parenting along with ways we minister to and mentor those less mature than we are.

My wife attends our church’s “Mothers Encouragement Group” and one of the benefits I receive from that is that she shares with me quotes from the material they are working through together.

And a line from a book by Paul David Tripp that they are reading through applies to this topic. Tripp writes: “Parenting is not a behavior-control mission; it is a heart-rescue mission. The only hope for a lost child is a radical transformation of the heart. As parents, we have no ability to change our children’s hearts, but the heavenly Father does, and we are his tools in the lives of our children. So, we don’t settle for the announcement of rules, the threat of punishment, and the enforcement of consequences. We are looking for every opportunity to address heart issues in our children, praying that as we do God will work the change in them that only he can accomplish.” [Tripp, 109]

We should be concerned for the actions of our children and those we minister to. But we should also recognize the complexity of the root system that branches out in their hearts on one end, and that leads to their actions on the other end. We should attend carefully to the heart.

We know when *we* do something we shouldn’t, that sin is a big part of that. But we know other things are too. We know that a sinful action is the result of sin in our heart, yes, but it can also be fueled by personal fears and insecurities, by wounds from past experience, by confusion about what’s expected of us, and more. We know the root system is complex, even when one of those roots is sin.

Do we recognize the same realities with our children and those we minister to? Do we recognize that our children’s hearts are an immense abyss? That within their souls is a cosmic universe? That the often-contradictory affections and movements of their hearts outnumber the hairs on their heads? Or do we reduce them to something less than that and focus on mere external conformity?

When we focus on external conformity *rather than* heart-level realities and a heart-level embrace of Christ, then a few things happen.

We can tend to reduce their whole spiritual condition down to their external actions and ignore the ways they may be growing and maturing internally. We can tend to assume our work is done when they conform externally, when like those described in our text, their hearts may not

actually be in the right place. We can tend to oversimplify the causes of their negative behaviors, and so may reach for the wrong prescription because we have not truly understood the problem. And we may fail to really get to know our children as real people, and therefore fail to truly come alongside them in their spiritual walk.

Again, in parental relationships we are far too easily content with external compliance when we should be pursuing heart-level realities.

Our text this morning confronts us with the truth that though a human being is an immense abyss, though within a human being lies a whole cosmic universe, though the affections and movements of a human heart outnumber the hairs on his or her head ... Jesus knows what is in every single one of us.

And that is significant.

We cannot hope to know the internal world of ourselves or of anyone else as well as Jesus knows it.

But we cannot neglect it either. Our text this morning reminds us that even in one professing faith, the difference in that internal world can determine whom Jesus entrusts himself to and whom he does not.

We must attend to the internal world – to our own and to that of others.

In what ways is the Lord calling you to do that?

In what ways is he calling you to more deeply explore the immense abyss in your own heart or the heart of another?

In what ways do you need to turn to Jesus and ask him to be your guide and help?

In what ways do you need to more deeply embrace Christ from the heart and help others to do the same?

In what ways do you need to actively entrust yourself to Christ, down to the depths of your soul ... so that he will entrust himself to you?

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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