

“Knowledge, Access, and Dependence”
John 16:21-33
November 22, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We continue this morning in Jesus’s instruction to his disciples in the moments leading up to his arrest. This morning we will come to the end of chapter sixteen of John’s Gospel.

This might be a good time to give you our trajectory for the next few months. Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent, and we will begin a four-week Advent series in our morning service. In January we will return to the Gospel of John, with a schedule to come to the end of John’s gospel about halfway through May, as we go through the arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection in a way that coordinates with the seasons of Lent and Easter.

With that trajectory before us, we come to chapter sixteen. We will start a few verses earlier than where we ended last Sunday, to give some context, and so we will read from verse twenty-one through verse thirty-three.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Jesus said to them:

^{16:21} When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. ²² So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³ In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

²⁵ “I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. ²⁶ In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸ I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”

²⁹ His disciples said, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! ³⁰ Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.” ³¹ Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? ³² Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“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, we plead before you this morning,
to give us understanding according to your word.
Let our prayer come before you now,
and deliver us according to your promises.
Our lips this morning have poured out your praise,
because you teach us your statutes.
Our tongues have sung of your word,
because we know that all your commandments are right.
And so, as we attend now to your word,
grant us understanding and be at work in our hearts,
for Jesus's sake. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:169-172]

INTRODUCTION

Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is to come – for his absence after the crucifixion, and then his much longer absence after his resurrection and ascension to the Father. He is preparing them for the trials they will face, and as we considered last Lord's Day, he tells them of the Advocate he will give them in the Holy Spirit, he tells them about the anticipation that they should have, like a woman in labor, of all that Christ will do at his return, and he tells them that they should be focused on the assignment he will give them in the meantime to proclaim his kingdom and gather people into it.

With the end of chapter sixteen, we come to the end of Jesus's words of instruction to his disciples before his arrest, as chapter seventeen is taken up with his high priestly prayer, and in chapter eighteen Jesus is arrested.

Jesus ends this instruction here by stressing the closeness his followers will have with God. Jesus is aware that with his physical absence his followers may be tempted to think of themselves as being distant or disconnected from God. What he assures them of here is that in him – in Jesus – God has drawn us close to himself.

In Jesus, God has drawn us close to himself.

Now, if that sense of disconnection from God is a temptation for believers because of Christ's absence, then that same sense of distance and disconnection from the entire spiritual realm is a dominant feature of the world we live in, and in the secular age we find ourselves in. And that secular pattern of thought can easily seep into our bones and our minds without us even realizing it. We very easily think of ourselves as distant or disconnected from God. And so we too are in need of Jesus's assurance here that in him, God has drawn us close to himself.

And in this passage Jesus points out three ways that God has drawn us close to himself in Christ: He has drawn us close in knowledge, he has drawn us close in granting access, and he has drawn us close in dependence on him. In knowledge, access, and dependence.

I. KNOWLEDGE

So first of all, in Jesus, God has drawn us close to himself in knowledge.

We see this in verse twenty-five. There Jesus says to the disciples: “I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.”

Now, as commentator D.A. Carson points out, by “figures of speech” here, Jesus likely does not mean simply metaphors, as he spoke in a few verses earlier. Rather, the idea, Carson explains, is the contrast “between what is enigmatic or cryptic during the ministry of Jesus, and what becomes plain or clear after Jesus’ death [and] exaltation and gift of the Spirit. It is not simply a matter of unpacking a figure of speech, [or] of explaining a parable.” Instead, it is about what Jesus will reveal to them through his actions, in his death and resurrection, it is about what Jesus will say to them after his resurrection, and it is about what Jesus will explain to them through the Holy Spirit, whom he will send to them after his ascension to the Father. [Carson, 546-547]

In other words, their knowledge of God the Father will come through Jesus and through the Holy Spirit – it will not come from their own discoveries. Jesus, as he says in verse twenty-six, will speak it to them when the time is right.

This is the Christian doctrine of revelation. It is the doctrine that what we know about God, what we know about God’s saving work, and what we know about what God requires of us, is found not primarily by our own discoveries, but by the word that God has spoken to us, as found now in the Christian Scriptures.

This is the doctrine of revelation that serves as the foundation for the Christian faith.

But living in our day and age, and being shaped by our culture ... the truth is that we can be uncomfortable with such claims ... even as we believe them. When spoken out loud they can strike us as prideful ... or as arrogant.

I remember when I was working in college ministry at Brown University, and we had a table at a student activities fair, and we had information there about Reformed University Fellowship – the college ministry of our denomination. And we were giving away various things. And one of the things we were giving away was a book titled *The World According to God: A Biblical View of Culture, Work, Science, Sex & Everything Else*. And a student from another table at the event – a student who wasn’t a Christian – came over and picked up one of the books and started looking at its table of contents. And the chapters listed there had sub-titles like “People According to God,” “Culture According to God,” “Work According to God,” “Science & Education According to God,” and so on.

And his eyebrows went up as he read. And without looking up he said “Wow ... you guys sure do know a lot about what God thinks.” And you could hear the incredulity in his voice.

And we talked for a bit. But the main thing he expressed was that it struck him as fairly arrogant, with all the different religions out there, with all the different worldviews human beings have held, for us to proclaim that *we* know what God thinks in a way that others don't.

Now, most Bible-believing Christians would know that that young man's perspective was flawed. But most of us have also been shaped enough by the secular perspective of late modernity that that young man's perspective *feels* kind of true, even if we would deny it intellectually.

We feel hesitant and sheepish about really asserting that; because we have the Bible, *we know* what God thinks and what he wants us to do in many areas of life. It feels like we're not being humble if we say something like that.

G.K. Chesterton addresses this feeling when he observed it over a hundred years ago. He writes that "the modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone." [Chesterton, 26]

But it's not only their isolation that is a problem. Chesterton also explains that the Christian virtues have been misapplied. And this is especially true, he says, with the virtue of humility. "What we suffer from today," he writes, "is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition [and] [...] has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert – himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt – the Divine Reason. [...] The old humility was a spur that prevented a man from stopping; not a nail in his boot that prevented him from going on. For the old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about his aims, which will make him stop working altogether. [...] We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table." he writes. [Chesterton, 27-28]

What is Chesterton getting at here?

Well, he's saying that we should be humble about ourselves. But we should not be humble about the truth we seek. We should be humble about our efforts in seeking the truth, but we are not to be humble about the fact that the truth is out there. We are to be humble about ourselves as knowers, but we are not to be humble about the knowledge itself that we seek to know.

And today we tend to get this wrong. Every one of us, because we are a part of our secular culture, are trained by the world around us to be confident in ourselves, and to be doubtful about the truth. We have flipped the dynamic on its head. But true humility is not found in doubting the truth of reality, it is found instead in having a realistic understanding of our own limitations as we seek the truth.

When we realize that – when that clicks in our minds – then we should realize that the Christian claims about the knowledge we can have about God are not arrogant – but they are the most humble claims to knowledge that exist. Because they freely admit the limitations we have as

human beings, and they place their trust not, therefore, in our strength and ability, but in God's strength and ability, apart from us.

After all, how does Jesus say that this knowledge of God the Father is acquired? He says in verse twenty-five "I [...] will tell you plainly about the Father." Knowledge of God is not achieved by our own cleverness or our own abilities. It is received, as a gift, through Christ. He tells us. He reveals it to us.

The doctrine of revelation is not an arrogant doctrine. It is a doctrine of humility. It is a doctrine that places our full confidence in what we can know about God not in ourselves but in him. Its primary trust is not in ourselves as knowers or as discoverers of truth, but in the God who made the universe and who will tell us himself who he is.

And that is what he has done in Christ. And that is what he has done in the Christian Scriptures. And that must shape every aspect of our relationship to God.

It should shape our relationship to the Scriptures. We should come to them attentively and with eager expectation – knowing that when we come to the Scriptures, we are trusting not in our own abilities, but we are coming in humility, with the expectation that Jesus will tell us, through his Word, what God is like and what he expects from us.

It should shape our expectations from preaching. After all, why would you come here on a Sunday to hear what a 36-year-old guy from New York thinks you should do with your life. That is absurd. And to whatever extent my sermons are my own opinions, that is what you would be doing. But that is not what preaching is supposed to be. Preaching is to be the communication of the content of the Word of God. Because there is nothing I have to offer you worthy of your full confidence, unless it is something coming from the Word of God.

Of course, as I preach, that truth is mediated. It's mediated through my understanding, through the insights of others that I try to bring to bear, and so on. But the truth itself must come from the Scriptures – from the revelation of God ... or else I don't know what on earth we are doing here. Our worship and the preaching we hear must be completely reliant on the doctrine of revelation – that we know what we know because God has revealed it to us in his Word.

God has drawn us close to himself, through the knowledge he has revealed to us about himself, through Jesus Christ.

That truth must shape how we relate to the Scriptures. It must shape what we expect when we gather on Sunday mornings. It also must shape our confidence in what we believe. If our beliefs, about who God is and about who we are, are rooted not in ourselves but in God's revelation to us, then that must dictate how we hold on to those truths. They are never just our own opinions. They are never just our own limited perspectives. They are truths we believe because we have been told them. They are truths we believe because of *who* has told them to us: not a mere man, but Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And so, when a mere human being questions what Jesus has told us ... no matter how clever that human being might be ... we must not put our ultimate trust in him or her, but in Jesus.

Finally, this truth that God has drawn us close to himself through the knowledge he has revealed to us in Christ should fuel our willingness to tell others about the truth of the gospel.

When you confess your faith to others – when you profess what you believe, when you admit that you are a Christian to someone, when you explain your convictions, when you present the gospel to others – you are not claiming a superior mind to theirs. You are not claiming to have naturally superior moral or spiritual intuitions than they do. You are claiming that someone else – that Jesus Christ, the Son of God – has told you things about God that you never would have discovered on your own. And you are offering to share what he has told you, with them. That’s why you can share the gospel with people who are smarter than you are or who are naturally more caring and conscientious than you are. Because it’s not about you.

Christian evangelism, understood rightly, is a profoundly humble act. It’s an admission of your limitations, not an assertion of your superiority.

It’s a claim not that you discovered the truth about God, but that God, in Christ, has drawn you close to himself, by revealing himself to you as a complete gift, out of sheer grace.

This is how God, through Christ, has drawn you close to himself in knowledge.

That’s the first thing we see here in this passage.

II. ACCESS

The second thing we see here is that in Christ God has drawn us close to himself by granting us access.

What do we mean by that?

Well, Jesus here speaks about our access to the Father. And he does it in a way that carefully holds onto two truths.

First, Jesus repeatedly tells the disciples that when they approach God the Father, they should do so in his name – in Jesus’s name. Jesus stresses that it is through his name that they gain access to the Father, and by which the Father will hear and answer their prayers.

But the fact that it is through Jesus that the disciples gain access to the Father doesn’t mean that their access to the Father is indirect. He makes this distinction in a few places. First, in verse 23 he specifies that what he has in mind is not them asking him, but that they would ask the Father in his name. Then, in verse 26 he says, “In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf.” In other words, the idea is not that they talk to Jesus and Jesus talks to the Father, but that because of Jesus they can go directly to the Father. And Jesus explains why in verse twenty-seven. There he says: “for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.”

Jesus mediates our relationship to the Father. It is only because of Jesus that we have access to the Father. But then, when we get that access, it is direct access. We ourselves can come to the Father.

And again, this picture is in contrast with the dominant spiritual frameworks of our culture. In our culture, access to God and to spiritual reality is either distant and indirect, or it is direct but unreliable.

Here's what I mean by that:

One common view of ultimate reality in our culture is that whatever spiritual truths – whatever metaphysical realities – underly the universe, they are detached, and distant from us, and we can't really access or experience them directly. Maybe some god or spiritual force made the universe and made us ... maybe there is some spiritual order or some divine lawgiver that guides our lives ... but he or she or it is distant now. We only can get vague reflections of that spiritual source. Maybe we see something of it in the created world – in the beauty of nature. Maybe we see something of it in the existence of right and wrong. Maybe we see something of it in human love and care. But it's always a reflection seen only dimly. The spiritual root of it is always distant from us. Our access to it is always indirect. That's one common spiritual framework in our culture.

Another common view of spiritual reality sees the spiritual realm as interacting with our lives more directly ... but our access to that spiritual realm is unreliable ... because our access to it is dependent ultimately on us. So maybe to gain that access we have to be in a particular spiritual or mental frame of mind ... or maybe we have to be in a particular moral or spiritual state ... and maybe in brief moments we feel like we can gain some access to spiritual reality, and it feels direct, and it feels significant ... but it is always fleeting. It is always gone again before we can really wrap our fingers around it.

These two tendencies – to view God or spiritual reality as distant and detached, or to view it as accessible, but only fleetingly and dependent on ourselves – these tendencies can be seen among Christians and non-Christians alike in our culture. One or both of them can probably be seen in you – in your default sense of how you relate to God.

But Jesus rejects both of those frameworks in this passage.

First of all, he rejects the detached and distant view of God the Father. Instead, he calls on his disciples to communicate directly to God. And he tells them that God will hear their prayers. And he tells them that God will *act* in time and space in response to their prayers. He says that multiple times in this passage.

And he even clarifies that this isn't just a game of spiritual telephone. It's not just that they pass their needs on to Jesus and Jesus forwards them up the chain of command to God the Father. No – he says in verse twenty-six “I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf” – no, instead he says to them “you will ask in my name.”

Our access to God the Father is not distant and indirect, but it is direct and intimate. That's the first aspect Jesus tells us about our access to God the Father.

But then, along with that, he also tells us that our access is not dependent ultimately on us. It is instead dependent on him. And that is key. That makes our access to God reliable and stable. That makes our access to God rooted not in our latest moral accomplishments or failures – it means our access is not based on our state of mind at the moment. – no, our access is built not on us, but on Jesus.

That is why Jesus repeatedly speaks of their need to approach the Father in his name – in Jesus’s name. And he spells it out further in verse twenty-seven. He says: “for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.” God’s love for the disciples and their access to God are rooted in the disciples’ relationship to Jesus – the fact that they believe in him, and love him, and have placed their trust in him.

That is what the gospel offers. It is not just a truce with a highly distant God. But it is also not intimate access to God that ebbs and flows with every success and failure in your life. No – it is intimate access to God the Father that is rooted in Jesus Christ. When you place your trust in Christ, when you believe in him, when you give your loyalty to him, when you love him, then on the basis of your relationship to Jesus, God the Father loves you and calls you into his presence, and he hears your words to him, and he takes them seriously. You have access to the Father.

How have you bought into our culture’s lie that real access to God is not possible in this life? How have you bought into our culture’s lie that access to God is based on your ability to reach out to him in some special way?

Jesus Christ calls on you to approach God the Father in confidence, knowing that he will hear you, and trusting that your access to him is rooted not in yourself, but in Jesus.

And that must transform the way we think of prayer and of worship.

We come to God the Father – whether through prayer as individuals, or in corporate worship as a gathered Body – and we believe that we have access not because we deserve it, but because of our relationship to Christ. And the access we have is intimate and direct.

Whatever kind of week you have had, when you come here to worship, you can have access to God the Father through Christ. Whatever kind of day you have had, you can come before God at the end of it in confidence, no matter your failures, so long as you come before him in reliance on Christ and not in reliance on yourself.

That’s the second way God has drawn us close to himself in Christ.

We saw first that he draws us close to himself in Christ through knowledge of him. We see second that he draws us close to himself by granting us direct access to him through Christ.

III. DEPENDENCE

Third and finally, we see in our passage this morning that in Christ God draws us close to himself through our dependence on him.

And this point Jesus doesn't so much explain to the disciples, as the disciples themselves display it by their lack of it. We see that in verses twenty-nine through thirty-two. There, after Jesus has explained to the disciples how God has drawn them close to himself through the knowledge revealed in Christ, and through the access granted to them by Christ, we read this – it says:

²⁹His disciples said, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! ³⁰Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.” ³¹Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? ³²Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone.

The disciples respond to the first two points of this passage with confidence. But it is misplaced confidence. And Jesus lets them know that in his response. “Do you now believe?” he asks them. D.A. Carson suggests that this response is best read with irony and exasperation. [Carson, 548] Another commentator translates it as an incredulous question: “So you do now believe, do you?” [Wright, 87]

Jesus sees the disciples' overconfidence for what it is. And he explains how false it is. Because he knows that they will soon all abandon him, and he will be left alone.

The disciples think they understand themselves, and their situation, and the foundation of their spiritual strength. But they don't. And as one writer puts it: “No misunderstanding is more pathetic than that which thinks it no longer exists.” [Carson, 548]

What the disciples illustrate for us here is the fact that we can mentally accept those first two points we have considered, and then make a major misstep in applying them. We can take in one hand the truth that in Christ we have been given knowledge of God, and we can take in the other hand the truth that in Christ we have access to God the Father, and then we can conclude that with these two truths we have the tools we need to forge ahead on our own, and we can try to step out independently, as if we are now spiritually autonomous with these two weapons in hand, and we can approach the spiritual challenges of life confident in our ability to overcome them, with the tools we've been given in Christ. And that is when we will fall flat. That is when we will fail. That is when we will behave like the disciples did at the arrest of Jesus.

They took the knowledge and access they had and treated them as tools or weapons to wield, instead of seeing them as dimensions of their relationship with God. And so they trusted in themselves, as if all they lacked before were these two tools that Jesus has now given them. And so a few verses after this confident declaration they will all be scattered.

This reminds us that the third way that God draws us close to himself in Christ is by drawing us close in dependence on him.

Our knowledge of God through his revelation is essential to our faith. Our access to God through Christ is essential. But that does not sum up our relationship to God. That is not sufficient to help us face the spiritual challenges we have in this life. For that we need to live every moment of our lives in reliance on God.

How do you tend to try to take the means of grace and use them in a way that allows you to avoid living in reliance on God himself?

Maybe you treat your knowledge of God, or your devotional life with God, or your faithful worship of God as something that if you get right, then you will be strong all on your own and you won't need to rely on him or on his people when things get difficult. But that is *not* the kind of relationship Jesus is holding out before us here.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne put it like this – he said: “I am tempted to think that I am now an established Christian,—that I have overcome this or that lust so long,—that I have got into the habit of the opposite grace,—so that there is no fear; I may venture very near the temptation—nearer than other men. This is a lie of Satan. I might as well speak of gunpowder getting by habit a power of resisting fire, so as not to catch the spark. As long as powder is wet, it resists the spark; but when it becomes dry, it is ready to explode at the first touch. As long as the [Holy] Spirit dwells in my heart He deadens me to sin, so that, if lawfully called through temptation, I may reckon upon God carrying me through. But when the [Holy] Spirit leaves me, I am like dry gunpowder. Oh for a sense of this!”

What is M'Cheyne saying here? He's saying that in our fallen state, we human beings are like gunpowder. We are liable to explode into sin. And temptation is the spark. But the Holy Spirit is like water. If we are to resist the temptation to sin – if we are to hold out against the spark, we are dependent, every moment, on the presence of the Holy Spirit – we must be saturated in the Spirit to resist. And to think that we can resist the spark without the Spirit – without the water – is the height of folly.

Which means that the arrogance of Christians is not found when they claim to know the truth as God has revealed it in the Scriptures. The arrogance of Christians comes when they, like the disciples here, think that with that truth, they, in and of themselves, are better than others and can now forge out on their own. Or when they think that their spiritual disciplines make them immune to temptation. How many Christians have made a mess of their lives by such overconfidence – such arrogant dependence on their own spiritual knowledge or practices, instead of on God himself?

Jesus will have none of that. The disciples, in the chapters ahead, will be a neon sign warning against such arrogance. They will prove the words of Robert Murray M'Cheyne. Even with our knowledge, even with our access, at our best we are but wet gunpowder when it comes to sin. Should we fail to depend on the Holy Spirit, we would go up in an explosion of sin when the spark of temptation presented itself. On the one hand, this must breed true humility in us, as we must come back to the Lord every day, every hour, every moment, if we are to live lives of faithfulness. On the other hand, this should breed confidence, because our spiritual lives are ultimately dependent not on our personal progress in strengthening ourselves, but in our reliance on the Lord. And in that we can be confident, for our Lord has overcome this world.

CONCLUSION

And those final words of Jesus, in this chapter, are important. It's after Jesus says that the disciples will scatter – that they will fail and fall away from him – that he says to them: “I have

said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Let’s pause and consider this. Jesus has just explained how his disciples – those whom he has poured himself into for the previous three years – would all monumentally fail him and abandon him before the night was over. That’s a big deal.

But Jesus doesn’t respond with despair. He doesn’t respond with a sense of defeat. Instead he tells them to have peace ... he tells them to “take heart” ... because *he* has overcome the world.

Jesus knows and he reminds them that their spiritual hope and peace is rooted in him – not in themselves. And that applies not just when they need help to resist temptation, but it also applies when they need forgiveness because they have sinned.

That is the gospel. In Christ God has drawn us close to himself, and he continues to draw us close to himself, even when we fail.

And so, if you have failed, you need to trust that the words you heard earlier in the service are true: God, in Christ, has forgiven you – he has forgiven all who place their trust in Jesus. That is past. Take heart. Have peace. For Jesus, in his cross, has already overcome all of your enemies – including your own sin.

And confident of that truth, he calls you to draw close to him again this morning – to receive what he is offering to you – to believe the Word he has revealed to you in the Scriptures, to take advantage of the access you have been given to the Father in Christ, by offering him your prayer and praise, and to lean in utter dependence upon him for every need you have in this life.

For as we read in verse twenty-seven, in Christ the Father himself loves you.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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