

SERMON TITLE: "By This We Know"
SERMON TEXT: 1 John 4:13-16 and 5:1-5, 13-20
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 19, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A few days ago in *The Standard-Examiner*, there was a long listing of all the school graduation dates and times. This is definitely the season when young people don their caps and gowns and receive their diplomas. This is the annual season when we, as a society, celebrate the accomplishment of some essential life goals and, hopefully, the achievement of a certain degree of knowledge.

Fortunately, the process by which we gain knowledge isn't limited to attending K-12 schools or institutions of higher education. If we're willing and curious, every day of our lives is an opportunity for us to learn and grow. For example, last week, when I was gone from you, Steve and I were on a trip in Southwest Florida. While attending a 3-day conference of the United Methodist Association of Health and Welfare Ministries, I learned all kinds of valuable information about faith-based senior living communities. During the second half of the week, I caught up on the latest about some relatives and learned about manatees, alligators, and the Calusa Indians who used to live in that region.

For those of us with open minds, there's never a shortage of opportunities for new discoveries. Sometimes that's the problem, though, isn't it? There's so much to learn; there's so much more than we could ever master; there's so much we realize that we don't know—that it's easy to doubt ourselves. In ancient times, a person had a lifetime to learn just a small amount of information. Things stayed pretty much the same for decades, if not centuries. But, now, with the internet and all the data available, we often feel like we're on information overload. There's no way we can keep up with the pace of change. Instead of living in a time of knowledge, it seems the opposite: We live in a time when we feel like we hardly know anything. And that sense of uncertainty and discomfort can affect even the brightest among us and create in us a kind of spiritual dis-ease.

That's why I selected today's scripture reading from First John chapters four and five. When Nancy read it to us, maybe you caught the theme of confident spiritual knowledge that comes up over and over again. I invite you to dig into these verses with me and see how it might feel for us to say with bold assurance, "By this we know."

1—WE'RE IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The first assurance we see in this passage of scripture is the knowledge that we're in right relationship with God. According to 1 John 4:13-16, we can know that we abide in God and that God abides in us. The Spirit of God testifies to our spirits that God is intimately connected to all of us who believe that Jesus is God's Son. As we put our trust in Jesus, we experience the love that God has for us.

First John approaches this knowledge from a mystical perspective and doesn't explain it all in a logical fashion. But we know from reading the four gospels that Jesus cared deeply for people and their human needs. Jesus was born as a humble human baby and lived among his first-century people with a powerful, godly presence. The disciples who knew Jesus most closely observed him bringing the miraculous possibilities of the divine into the midst of their mundane and mortal existence. They witnessed how Jesus brought light into the darkness and healing and hope to those in despair. By welcoming Jesus and his teachings into their lives and practicing his ways, those followers of Jesus experienced that same divine power working in and through them.

This is the spiritual knowledge and confidence that First John is trying to convey. We can know that we're OK with God because we have this deep sense that God is abiding in us and we are abiding in God. We have this blessed assurance because of our connection to God's Son, who demonstrated so clearly how divinity and humanity are intertwined. Through our understanding and experience of Jesus, we too are born of God and live with God. By a mystical union made possible in, through, and by Christ, yes, we can know that we're in right relationship with God.

2—WE'RE IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHILDREN OF GOD

According to 1 John 5:2-6, a second source of confidence for us can be our knowledge that we're in right relationship with the children of God. Verse 2 says, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments." I suspect all of us have some anxiety and doubt when it comes to interpersonal and societal relationships, but here we have some really good advice. If we obey the commandments of God, we'll probably do a really good job of getting along with our siblings; neighbors; the people across town; people of different ethnic, racial, and religious groups; and even nations around the world. If we honor our mothers and fathers and if we don't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet—then we'll go a long way toward having peaceable and healthy relationships with all the children of God.

Does that mean we'll never have any conflicts, and that all our social anxieties will go away? No, unfortunately, probably not. I'm sure there'll always be some way we'll offend each other. But if we love our neighbors of every color and class and culture, as Jesus commanded us to do, then, by that love, we'll be much more confident that we did all we could to live in harmony and promote the good of society. Spiritual assurance will replace self-doubt, and we'll know that we're in right relationship with the children of God.

3—WE HAVE PRAYER POWER TO OVERCOME SIN

Now, I suppose there might be some of us here today who are thinking, "Well, that's really great if we do in fact obey God's commandments. But what if we fail sometimes? What if we don't always love God and each other fully? What if we sometimes don't even love ourselves very much?"

Well, First John has us covered there too. In chapter five, verses 14-19, we read about sin and prayer. These verses say that, if we pray according to God's will, God hears us, and we can know that God will honor our requests. In such prayers, we align ourselves with God's desires and, thus, we turn

away from evil and avoid doing wrong things. In fact, says verse 16, if we pray for our brothers and sisters who have sinned, God will hear our prayers and give life even to them.

Do you hear that? By offering prayers to God and by aligning our prayers with God's will, we have the power to overcome sin in our own lives *and* in the lives of others. Talk about confidence! Talk about assurance! Nothing should be holding us back! By offering these powerful prayers, we know we can overcome sin!

4—WE HAVE ETERNAL LIFE

The grand finale of knowledge that First John suggests is found in chapter five, verses 13 and 20. There we read that, by believing in God's Son Jesus, we may know that that we have eternal life.

Most of us think of eternal life as what happens to us after we die, and "eternal life" certainly includes that. But Bible scholars tell us that, in the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John, "eternal life" means much more than an infinite quantity of years. In the writings of John, "eternal life" means a quality of life that begins now. This born-again or born-from-above transformation of spirit is possible while we walk this earth. It's a way of being that experiences and practices God's kingdom now as well as later. Having eternal life means that joy, love, and peace—the heavenly realities that we're hoping for—don't all have to wait until the future. Our salvation isn't just pie in the sky after we die. These are qualities of life that we can enjoy right now—qualities that we experience and bring into being by knowing and believing in Jesus.

To help you see this—if you still have your Bibles open—you should look again at the last sentence of verse 20. It says that Jesus Christ "is the true God and eternal life." Jesus is eternal life. Or you could turn that around and say, "Eternal life is Jesus." That's a different and much more expansive idea than us living an infinite number of years. By our belief in the Son of God, yes, we have future hope, but we also can have a very real and current knowledge of eternal life.

CONCLUSION

Do you remember the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy and her friends stand before the Wizard? I'm talking about the part after they are scared out of their wits by the loud and angry voice and projected image. I'm talking about the scene in which the man behind the curtain talks with Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man with actual kindness. Each one of those characters had traveled to Oz because they thought they lacked something crucial to their happiness and well-being. Each one of them doubted themselves because of some perceived failing.

But the kind Wizard revealed to them that they really didn't lack anything of importance. Each one already had what he or she needed. So, instead, the Wizard gave them just a symbol of assurance. To the Lion, he gave a badge to signify the courage he already had. To the Tin Man, he gave a red plastic heart hanging on a pendant. To Dorothy, he gave the instructions to tap her ruby-red slippers together. And to the Scarecrow, who thought he lacked a brain—the Wizard gave a rolled up diploma—an honorary degree that symbolized the great intelligence and knowledge that straw man already had.

I think sometimes we're like the Scarecrow. We think we don't know much. We doubt ourselves. We feel uneasy. We lack spiritual confidence and boldness. If we were to go before the Wizard, we might ask him to give us assurance.

If we did, though, I think the Wizard might tell us we've already got what we need. By believing in God's Son Jesus, we know that we are in right relationship with God. By obeying God's commandments, we know that we are in right relationship with the children of God. By offering prayers in alignment with God's will, we know we can overcome sin. And by believing in God's Son Jesus, we know we have eternal life. If you need a symbol, take home your bulletin and cut out the picture of the graduation cap and diploma, and tape it on your bathroom mirror. But most of all, remember First John's important message about spiritual knowledge. There's no big mystery. It's all right here. By this we know.