

SERMON TITLE: "By This We Know"  
SERMON TEXT: 1 John 4:13-16 and 5:1-5, 13-20  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: June 2, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

Some of you have probably attended or at least received notifications of graduation ceremonies that have occurred over the past several weeks. May and June are the months when young people typically don their caps and gowns, receive their diplomas, and celebrate the attainment of knowledge.

Fortunately, the process by which we gain knowledge isn't limited to high school, college, or even graduate school. If we're willing and curious, every day of our lives is an opportunity for us to learn and grow. Especially now, with the technology of online webinars and YouTube tutorials, the possibilities of gaining more knowledge are endless. For those of us with curiosity and 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 and pre-industrial 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 24/7 news cycle and all the data available, we often feel like we're experiencing 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 can affect even the brightest among us and create in us a kind of spiritual discomfort and 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 this morning and see how it might feel for us to say with bold assurance, “By this we know.”

### **1—THAT WE’RE IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

The first assurance we see in this passage of scripture is that we can know 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 that isn’t spelled out with a lot of details. 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 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 his divine and miraculous 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 participation in the compassionate and miraculous work 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—THAT WE’RE IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHILDREN OF GOD**

We find a second source of confidence in 1 John 5:2-6. We can know that we’re in right relationship with the children of God. Verse two 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 strong advice. If we obey the commandments of God, we’ll probably get along well with our siblings; neighbors; the people across town; people of different ethnic, racial, and religious groups; and even other nations of 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, probably not. But if we love our neighbors of every color, class, and culture, as Jesus commanded us to do, then 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—THAT WE HAVE PRAYER POWER TO OVERCOME SIN**

Now, I suppose there might be some of us 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 that we can overcome sin!

#### **4—THAT WE HAVE ETERNAL LIFE**

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

Most of us think of eternal life as what happens to us after we die, which is something that we really have no way to know anything about. Our ideas about life after death are assumptions based on human hopes and dreams, some near-death experiences, and the reports of Jesus' resurrection and other scriptures. We have very little scientific proof to rely on.

But Bible scholars tell us that, in the Gospel of John and the Letters of John, "eternal life" means more than what happens in that mysterious time after death. In the writings of John, "eternal life" also means a quality of life that begins now. According to John, this born-again or born-from-above transformation of spirit is possible while we still walk this earth. Eternal life is 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. We can enjoy these qualities of life right now by knowing and believing in Jesus.

First John 5:20 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." In other words, however much we're following Jesus now, we're already living eternal life. In whatever ways we're imitating Christ now, we're already experiencing eternal life. In whatever ways we're informing our spirits by the teachings of Jesus, we're already participating in eternal life. By our belief in Jesus, the Son of God,

yes, we have future hope. Hallelujah for that! But even today, already, we can know that we have eternal life.

### **CONCLUSION**

You know the saying, “Knowledge is power.” You probably also know the saying, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” That second saying was written by a church historian who was commenting on violence perpetrated by religious leaders during the Inquisition. He was reflecting on the tendency of people to misuse their power, especially if they have a lot of political or religious authority.

That being the case, we religious people don’t ever want to become so confident in our knowledge that we enact religious violence against other people. We should never be so sure of ourselves that we leave no room for questions, curiosity, humility, and respect for other people.

But, as I said at the beginning of this sermon, in this time in which there is so much information available and data is coming at us a million miles an hour, we also don’t want to be paralyzed with doubt. There has to be a happy medium where we can function with a sense of assurance that God has given us what we need.

By believing in God’s Son Jesus, we know that we are in a right relationship with God. By obeying God’s commandments, we know that we are in a right relationship with the children of God. By offering prayers in alignment with God’s will, we know that we have the power to overcome sin. And, by believing in God’s Son Jesus, we know that we have eternal life. The essentials are all right here. By this we know.