

From the sermon

## How Do We Know that God Is Real? Faith: Another Avenue to Knowledge

The Rev. Dr. John R. Claypool  
*American author and preacher (1931-2005)*

..."**I have to admit to you,**" I said, "many times, for all kinds of reasons, what you are charging about the religious enterprise has taken place. People have dug deep into their needs and wishes and out of that constructed their faith, and it doesn't correspond to anything real out there. It is simply a reflection of what is inside of them. But," I said, "having conceded that what you're talking about has in fact happened many times, **I want you to do three things before you come to a final judgment about this very, very momentous question. Because I believe you're honest and you're seeking, I invite you to do three things before coming to closure.**

"First I'd like for you to block out some time to sit down and **read the Gospel of Mark at one sitting.** It won't take you that long, maybe 45 minutes. I want you to read it the way you'd read a profile in the New Yorker. As you read it, I want you to ask this simple question: Is the figure that this Gospel describes a weak and fearful person who is making up His ideas of God in order to escape trouble, or is the one who stands at the center of this Gospel in touch with something outside Himself, one He called Abba, Father? Was he in fact in touch with something outside of Himself that got Him into trouble rather than delivering Him out of trouble?

"In particular, I want you to look at what happened on the last night of His life. Right before He was crucified, He knelt in a garden, and there He agonized over the prospect that lay right ahead of Him. And He begged God,. 'All things are possible, take, if you will, this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will but Your will be done.'

"Whatever else you say about that particular experience, that is not religion as wish fulfillment. That is not somebody making up a faith vision simply to deliver them out of some kind of trouble. Rather it's like any faithful scientist who is committed to truth above all things. It strikes me as a person who is in touch with something beyond Himself and is willing to let that reality be more important than all of His wishes and all of His desires.

"I want you to ask the question as you read the Book of Mark: **Is this Jesus a weak coward making up something, or is He in touch with something that made extraordinary demands of Him?**

**"The second thing I'd like you to do," I said, "is to go to the Book of Acts and look at one of the main figures in that story -- a man named Saul of Tarsus.** He was a devout Hebrew. He was a pharisee. [He couldn't believe it] when he heard that people were saying that a crucified carpenter was in fact the Messiah whom God had sent to save the world, it was so at variance with what he had expected the Messiah to be. Saul had expected the Messiah to come like another David figure, with a sword in His hand, and wipe out all the enemies of Israel and establish Jerusalem as the new Rome. He had so expected that kind of Messianic person. To say that a carpenter from Galilee who wound up being crucified was God's Messiah was utterly antithetical to Saul.

"He set out to destroy this heresy as quickly as he could. He was on his way to Damascus to search out and destroy some of the believers in this heresy when he had this incredible experience. A blinding light knocked him to the ground, something beyond him broke into his experience.

"So," I said, **"I want you to ask a question about what Saul of Tarsus discovered on the road to Damascus: Does it represent wishful thinking?** Was it what he most wanted to be true ... was he making it up out of his needfulness? Or is it closer to the truth to say that he suddenly encountered something outside himself that cut right across everything that he wanted and needed? The truth revealed to him that day was the very opposite of what he had built toward his whole life. **If he accepted that truth, it meant reorganizing his existence from top to bottom. Whatever else you say about that, this is not religion as wish fulfillment."**

Then I said, **"The third thing I'd like you to do is to sit down some day and write out in your own words the kind of religious vision that you hope mostly to be true.** I want you to make up a religion that suits you exactly and precisely. I must confess that in writing up my ideal religion myself, I would never put in anything about loving my enemies. I'd never put anything about forgiving 70 times seven. I would make no mention of taking up a cross and denying myself. I would have no mention of a judgment or the possibility of hell.

"My point is, there is much in the Christian body of belief that is not what is easiest for selfish people to embrace. There is much that challenges us. There is much that cuts straight across our egotism and our desire." I said, **"Before you come to a final conclusion that there is nothing to the religious enterprise except selfishness and needfulness projected on the screen outside ourselves, I'd like for you to look at the life of Jesus, the experience of Saul of Tarsus and then examine your own needs, your own wants, and compare this to the canon."**

It is to her great credit that she heard me. She was serious about her spiritual life. She went away and did the things that I asked, and we began a correspondence that went on for months. She came back that summer, and we had lots and lots of other talks.

I'm happy to tell you that because of her honest asking, seeking and knocking, because of her being willing to be open to whatever it was out there that had the shape of truth, that later that year she came to a profound experience much like Saul of Tarsus came to on the Damascus road. I watched that person develop into a very thoughtful and authentic Christian person.

I've told her story to simply make the point that **the things that we believe need to come from the outside in and not from the inside out.** Authentic religious conclusions are discoveries that we make of something beyond ourselves. This is not simply selfishness being acted out and projected on the screen. **Authentic religious truth comes to us exactly like every other truth comes to us, that is, something beyond ourselves breaks in, and we perceive it, and we shape our conclusions according to the evidence.** We don't twist the evidence in order to correspond to what we may be wanting.

I think one of our big problems is that we've never really understood clearly the nature of faith. I think, as I was growing up, I thought that faith was the opposite of knowing. I thought that I was like the little boy that C.S. Lewis talks about who says, "Faith is having to believe something that you know ain't so." That is, it's embracing something that's contrary to all of the ways that you encounter reality.

**But faith is not an alternative to knowing. Faith rightly understood is yet another avenue to knowing.** By the grace of creation, we have been given so many ways of interacting with the outside world. We are, as someone has said, a wonderfully porous creature.

When I was in the second grade, my teacher said, "I want to teach you this afternoon about the different ways that you have of perceiving the many splendored world all about you." She said, "You have an eye gate through which all the wonder of color and shape enters into your experience. You have the ear gate through which the wonder of sound comes, the nose gate through which odor comes, the tongue gate which is where taste comes into your experience, the skin gate that enables you to feel and to perceive. You have these five ways of interacting with the world outside yourself. There are many kinds of reality out there, and you have many different ways of perceiving."

I want to say to you that what the eye is to color, what the ear is to sound, what the nose is to odor, faith is to the divine dimension of reality. **Faith is the capacity that we have been given by the grace of God to perceive that which is essentially spiritual, which is sacred and holy by nature.** You reach religious conclusions the same way the scientists reach conclusions in the laboratory. The difference between the knowing of science and the knowing of faith is that the object that we are perceiving is spiritual in nature and not physical.

The point is that when we enter a search for religious reality, we need to sit down before a fact like a little child, exactly as the faithful scientist does. We need to

recognize that we have the capacity of faith, which is God's way of helping us perceive the divine dimension of reality. We know things of the spirit in that same kind of humility that we know things with our eyes, our ears, our nose. Those organs perceive things beyond themselves and allow them to enter into our experience.

**Faith is yet another avenue to knowledge; it is not an alternative to knowledge.** Therefore, in making up your mind about the great alternate questions, **I invite you to a kind of openness that believes that truth is more important than anything else, and that God is the source of all truth. If you will be honest in your asking, seeking and knocking, if you'll open the windows of your soul 360 degrees and know that God has ways of making God's own reality known to us through the capacity of faith, there will come, as there did to Saul of Tarsus, as there did to my young friend, there will come God's moment when God will make God's own reality known to you in ways that are profoundly authentic. It will be something from the outside in and not from the inside out.**

I believe you would agree that one of the great Christian converts of the 20th century is **C.S. Lewis**. When he was ten years old, his mother was afflicted with cancer and died. As a little boy brought up in the church, he had prayed earnestly to God that she would be healed and not die, and when she did, it was a terrible disappointment. Because children are so concrete in the way they see things, he concluded that his prayer was not answered because there was no answerer, there was no such thing as a God who cared for His people. In his grief, he made up his mind that there must not be a God.

He was tremendously intelligent. He was sent away to private schools almost immediately, and for years he assumed that the universe is empty, that there is nothing divine, nothing purposeful behind all reality. He collected all kinds of evidence to support this opinion he had developed in childhood that there was nothing, nothing behind it all but great random emptiness.

When he got to Oxford and became a brilliant student of philosophy and medieval English, he began to encounter individuals who were believers in a God. He was amazed to find out that they were careful in their scholarship, that they were very, very truth-seeking people just like he intended to be. He also found books that began to raise the possibility that maybe there was a mystery behind it all, that maybe what he had decided at ten years of age was not the deepest truth.

Lewis says in his autobiography that as he began to realize that there just might be something real behind all that corresponds to this word, *God*, his honest feeling was not-- I hope Christianity is true, but I'm afraid it's not. He said his real feeling state was-- I'm afraid it's true, and I hope it's not. He had 20 years invested in atheistic arguments. He did not want to admit that perhaps all these years he had been

mistaken. There was this great prejudice in him against having to embrace something that for years he had railed against.

But just like Saul of Tarsus, just like my friend, because of his love for truth above all things, there came a time, as he writes in his autobiography, when alone in his room in Maudlin College in Oxford, that God literally entered into his experience. He could not in the name of truth deny the reality of this power that was breaking in from beyond. Because he loved truth more than anything else, he sent up the white flag of surrender. He said, "I was the most reluctant convert in all the isle, in all the isle of England."

**Religion for him became discovery and not invention.** Some days later, people who knew him began to hear him talk differently and asked, "What on earth has happened to you?" Lewis said with great humility, "My God has happened to me."

You see religious truth is event. It is the mystery breaking in from beyond and authenticating that there is, beyond it all, this incredible and wondrous and mysterious reality.

Therefore, as you ask the question, "I, why? Why do I believe what I do?" **I invite you to realize that authentic truth is of the same cloth no matter where you find it. It breaks in from beyond. It is something that exists apart from our desires and apart from our needfulness. It is what it is. If we are committed to embracing that above all things and willing to ask, seek and knock, if you will in openness say, "I want to know the truth and I want to know it whatever shape it takes," if that is your spirit, I have every confidence that in God's good time and in God's own mysterious and inexplicable ways, God will have His hour with you.**

You will see truth for what it is, discovery and not invention. When God comes, I hope you will respond with that God-given capacity, that sixth sense, that power of faith which enables us to know and to receive and to be engulfed with truth. **In your intellectual journeys, I wish each of you a brave and honest and hopeful destination.**

Depart now in the fellowship of God the Father, and as you go, remember: In the goodness of God, you were born to this world. By the grace of God, you have been kept all the day long, even until this hour, and by the love of God fully revealed in the face of Jesus, you are being redeemed. Amen.

Copyright 2000 The Rev. Dr. John R. Claypool