

Googling God
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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John 14:15-21 (NRSV)

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. [16] And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. [17] This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

[18] "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. [19] In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. [20] On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. [21] They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

GOOGLING GOD

Have you ever Googled your name on the Internet? For those of you who may not use the Internet that much, Googling is actually a new word that means looking up information about something by using the search engine, Google. We've turned a proper noun into a verb. I google. You google. He, she, or it googles. We google. You google. They google. Some words are more fun than others to conjugate.

If you've never googled before you may be amazed at what you can learn. When my name is googled you can read an excerpt from my dissertation, go to a website that details my family history and learn my current address and phone number. You can find out how long I have lived at my current address and for a price you can find out my credit score.

In fact I'm a little uneasy about how much you can find out about me. I would like to remain more of a mystery. But, we live in an age where personal privacy is a thing of the past. All of us are an open book for anyone who wants to do a search on the Internet. Don't do anything too bad. It will be on the Internet for all to see. I found out there was another Frank Allen who was convicted for possession and distribution of cocaine!

And that got me to wondering. What would I find on the Internet if I Googled God? How many hits would I get? Would my computer explode?

I decided to try it out on the church's computer instead of my own! You'll be happy to know that the church's computer did not explode, but I did get 470,000,000 hits. I read the first 10.

One was a website talking about the end of the world. Another was a website by a former atheist explaining why she now believed in God.

Yet another website was by an atheist group giving 50 reasons why they didn't believe in God. Their arguments might be summarized with the following questions, "When I prayed for that Mercedes Benz why I didn't get it?" and "If the risen Jesus appeared to disciples long ago, then why doesn't he appear to me in my kitchen tonight?"

Apparently if you want to find out something about God, googling is not the answer. Who is God? There are at least 470,000,000 answers out there.

But, I did find an intriguing link about God on the official homepage of all places the American atheist society. It was about something called Pantheism ... sort of an updated version of Deism. Deism is sort of a glorified form of nature worship.

In that article the author admitted that religious communities, despite all their problems, did provide a service. Among other things he said that religion provides communities of mutual support, and freely admitted that the benefits of religious communities can also be seen in the form of better health and longer life.

His solution was to try and incorporate these good aspects of religion without actually believing in God except for the "god" of nature. I appreciate the power and majesty of nature. But, I must admit that I find little solace in the "god" of nature.

The natural laws of the universe are awe inspiring but they do not necessarily inspire confidence. The same forces that bring rain and prosperity can also bring about storms and destructive drought. The same cells that allow growth and development can also cause cancer.

We may have a positive reverential feeling about our lives on planet earth, but those feelings do not necessarily translate into (as they put it on this website) "a basis for dealing with stress, grief and bereavement." Supportive communities of faith are rarely formed around nature worship.

GOD IN US, PARAKLETOS

But, I think that the atheists have some good questions. Why are heartfelt prayers unanswered? Where can we find the presence of the risen Christ today? How can we become a community of faith that lends support in the most difficult times of life?

Today's lesson offers an answer to those questions, and the answer sounds almost new age. Our Scripture lesson for today teaches us that God is in us.

Last week we discussed the fact that Jesus has told his disciples some disturbing news. Soon he would be leaving them and where he was going they could not follow. In other words, this passage tackles the difficult problem of the absence of Jesus.

Where is Jesus when things get rough in our lives? Are we left all alone? Are we on our own? Are we like orphans without someone to care for us or guide us?

Jesus tells his disciples that this is definitely not true. He tells them that they will not be left as orphans. He will send them his Spirit, and this Spirit will “abide” or remain in us. There is not a time when we are without the Spirit of the living God. So, according to the Bible, if you’re going to Google God, if you want a definition of God the answer comes up Spirit.

In John’s gospel Jesus uses a fascinating word for Spirit, the Greek word “parakletos.” This word is so rich in meaning that almost every modern translation of this passage uses a different word to translate it.

Biblical names were not just a way to address someone; they also pointed to a person’s character. For example, in the Old Testament the name Jacob meant “he who supplants” or the one who always trying to get everything. That was Jacob. Most of this life was spent trying to walk over someone else in order to get his way. He wanted to be number one.

But, thankfully the character of the Holy Spirit is much different. What is the nature of the Spirit that is in us, the Spirit that testifies to the power and presence of the Risen Christ? The word “parakletos” can accurately be translated, “comforter, counselor, advocate and someone who walks with you.”

COMFORTOR

Let’s think about the implications of these possible translations. First, the Spirit of Christ is a Spirit of comfort. The old spiritual proclaims, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.” And I’ve found that this is often true. Grief is a very private and lonely time. We all experience it differently and sometimes those who attempt to comfort us can actually cause more harm than good. They give answers that are too pat or show by their actions that they don’t really understand.

If you visit a friend who is in deep grief, don’t try to do too much. Instead, trust the power of God’s Spirit to be a Comforter. I think that Paul’s description of the Holy Spirit in his letter to the Romans is helpful. Paul recognized the fact that there are times in our life when we are so upset that we cannot even pray. But, when we don’t have any words, God speaks for us. Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit prays for us, intercedes for us “with sighs too deep for words.”

I have come to trust this truth in a very deep way. Quite often I don’t have any words to proclaim in the face of tremendous grief, but somehow God’s Spirit brings an internal word of hope. It is God who comforts the bereaved. The author on the atheist website recognized the importance of this in the Christian community. What he didn’t realize was the source of this comfort. It is none other than the power of God’s Spirit living in us and giving us strength at the time we need it most.

I can understand why some might find this hard to understand or believe. But, for those of us who have felt the comfort of God’s Spirit, we know that it is the truth. Sometimes our deepest moment of faith occur when we face life’s greatest challenge. It is then that we know that the Spirit of God is in us.

COUNSELOR

The second function of the Spirit indicated by the Greek word, “parakletos” is that of Counselor. Today it is an accepted principle that there are times in our life when we need a counselor. Perhaps we’re having trouble with depression or marital problems. I think it’s a great idea to call in a good counselor. Don’t ever hesitate to ask for help when you feel like you’re in over your head.

But, in order for counseling to be effective two things have to happen. First, you have to be willing to go to counseling, to ask for help. And second, you need to be willing to hear the truth. Those are often two big obstacles.

I don’t know about you, but I’m not real fond of hearing the unvarnished truth about myself. There are often things that I need to hear that I don’t want to hear. In fact if you tell me the truth I just might get angry with you. That’s why so many people leave counseling sessions in a huff, vowing never to come back again. They hear a deep truth about themselves that is just too difficult to bear.

Whenever I study and think about a passage of Scripture quite often I am convicted of some shortcoming. And this is precisely how the Spirit does His work.

The Spirit is a Counselor who does His work through the medium of truth. In verse 17 Jesus refers to this Counselor as the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. But, we can receive that truth because the Spirit abides or lives in us.

One proof of the existence of God’s Spirit is the proof of changed lives. When I was in the Baptist church we used to sing a song about serving a Risen Savior and one line went, “You ask me how I know he lives ... he lives within my heart.”

Those of us who have seen the light, the truth of God as revealed in His Spirit have been changed by that revelation. He is the effective Counselor who changes us, and He lives within our heart.

It is a deep truth that cannot be contradicted.

ADVOCATE

The third function of the Spirit as indicated by the Greek word, “parakletos” is the function of advocate. The Spirit is our advocate or our lawyer. This is a problem that is often ignored and even ridiculed by the world, the problem of sin and guilt.

If you were on trial for a crime, what would you want more than anything else? You would want a good lawyer!

I remember a line from a movie in which a lawyer is speaking with a client in jail. He said, "Remember all that money you've been saving for a rainy day? Guess what, it's raining!" Good lawyers do not come cheap. You often get what you pay for.

But, we have an advocate, a lawyer who not only works "pro bono" he also takes our place on the judgment stand. No earthly lawyer would do that for any amount of money.

But, the Spirit is no earthly lawyer. The Spirit is a heavenly lawyer that confronts the greatest problem facing the world today, the problem of sin and guilt. And He takes that sin and guilt away.

The title of advocate reminds us that the heart of God is a heart of grace. One reason that we are enabled to hear the truth about ourselves from the Counselor is that we know the Counselor is also our Advocate, the one who sets us free from sin and guilt.

When I first started studying psychology, I ran across a study that suggested when people really understand their lives through intensive psychoanalysis, they didn't attain greater emotional health. They got worse!

The truth did not set them free. The truth just increased their burden. The truth about ourselves can only set us free if we know the whole truth, and the whole truth is that though we are great sinners, God is a great Savior.

Grace lies at the heart of the Christian faith, and that Spirit of grace is a part of us. It is grace, the forgiveness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ that enables us to have a community where everyone is accepted.

It is not within our power to create such a community. But, by the power of God's Spirit such a community is possible.

FRIEND

That brings us to the fourth and final implication of that Greek word, "parakletos." The Spirit is "someone who walks with you" or as Eugene Peterson translates in the Message, the Spirit is a Friend.

We've all sung that song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." Well, the Spirit is our friend as well. The Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus and the Spirit of friendship. The Spirit is One who stays with us and walks with us no matter how difficult the path.

Isn't that a good definition of friendship? A friend is someone who walks with us no matter how difficult the path. And the Spirit of God is the epitome of friendship. When all others leave us, the Spirit is still with us.

Again this is another truth that we cannot learn when things are going well. It is only something that we can learn in the time of trial.

Did you ever notice that often the most spiritual people are often those who have lived a difficult life? Those with the deepest spiritual reserves are often those who have walked the lonesome valley and know from hard experience that the Spirit of God in Christ was with them every step of the way.

THE GOD EXPERIMENT

Admittedly the presence of God's Spirit in our life is a subjective matter. My friends on the atheist website would say that I'm tricking myself when I say all these things about the Spirit of God being within me. They would point out that there is no scientifically verifiable way of determining what I say is true.

But, I would suggest that there is an experiment that we can try. If the Spirit of God is within us, if all the promises of the Spirit are true ... if God is gracious, if God is our friend, if God comforts us, how might we live in response to that truth?

Our passage for today suggests an answer to that question. We would keep the commandments of Jesus.

In others words, we would be gracious to others as he is gracious to us. We would be a friend to others as he is a friend to us. We would forgive others as he has forgiven us. We would speak the truth, believing that the truth will indeed set us free.

And, the Bible tells us, if we do that, if we act as if we have faith, perhaps we will find that we do.

In other words, the answer to the one who is skeptical about the Christian faith is not read the Bible or go to church or believe this way because you're going to hell if you don't. The answer to the skeptic is very scientific in a way. The is to try an experiment in faith.

Live in the manner of Christ. Obey his commands to forgive and be a friend. Surely this won't hurt anything. Even on the atheist website there is the admission that there is much to be gained by a supportive community and the resources that we have for comforting others during times of bereavement. What harm would it do to give this different lifestyle a try?

And the promise of this passage is when we do that, when we walk for a while in the footsteps of Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus begins to get into our skin so to speak.

We begin to change. We begin to feel the love of God as revealed in Jesus. We know that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

When it comes to God the skeptics are not only found on the website of the American Atheist. There are skeptics who worship in the church every Sunday. These skeptics have made a profession of faith, but that's about it. Their faith has been petrified at the entry level.

One preacher talked about it this way. He wrote,

“It's the keeping of the commandments; not professing them that will lead us to the fullness of Christ. I can profess to have a frozen turkey in the fridge but that doesn't sustain me.

I can cook the frozen turkey and eat it by myself but that only brings a selfish satisfaction of my needs.

However, the moment I serve it to family, friends, those who are hungry or alone; that frozen carcass brings sustenance, joy and community ...

Is my relationship with Christ frozen in a profession of faith or has it moved to obedience?”

The preacher goes on to say, “Living in rural Washington we have saying about cowboy-wanna-bes. We say that they are “all hat and no cows?”

I think that's a great way to think about the problem. Many of us who profess to be disciples of Jesus are “all hat and no cows.”

There is often no reality to the profession we make. We profess to follow the one who is epitome of grace and friendship, but we do not show that grace and love toward others.

If we want to really know God, it takes more than just “Googling” his name on the Internet or professing a certain set of beliefs.

Knowing God requires that we put faith into action. True faith has “legs.” Faith moves us to obedience. Knowing God requires that we do what faith requires. Knowing God requires that we try on that lifestyle ... that way, truth and life as revealed in Jesus.

And if we do that, we will find that the Spirit of the Risen Christ is indeed with us. We will know the reality of a hope that abides forever.

Amen.

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