

Just Trying to Understand

John 3: 16

This is one in a series of sermons based on questions asked by members of Crossroads Church – the “Ask Jack” series. Today’s question is really a double question. First, “Can We Understand God?” There’s a simple and clear answer: “Yes and No”.

No, we cannot understand God. God is the word that describes ultimate reality. It is the ultimate of which we are aware and the “more” we can’t even perceive. The answer is “No” when we think of understanding in the sense that we understand how to troubleshoot a computer, how to study for a test, or what makes life worth living. In fact, we can probably understand all these infinitely more clearly than we can understand God. It has been suggested that ants crawling on a calculator are better able to understand its workings than we can understand the depth, breadth, and extent of God’s nature and purpose. The answer is clear: “No” ... and “Yes”.

Yes, we can understand God in the way we understand an artist from observing his/her works of art. Yes, in the way we understand a friend by watching them live life, by talking with them and talking with others who know them about them, and by observing how we feel in their presence. We can understand God by observing the universe – by learning more about the cosmos and the microscopic world. We can understand God by learning more about other life forms, about human beings, and about ourselves. We can look ever more deeply into our inner self and learn because the imprint of God is there.

The Bible assumes God. It describes God in terms of people’s experience and perceptions. Can we understand God? “Yes” and “No”. I’m not finished with this question quite yet, but would like to come back to it after considering the second “Ask Jack” question.

The second question is “Who is Jack and what is his story?” Perhaps it’s an informative story? Perhaps it’s an enjoyable story? I hope so. I plan to tell my own story very briefly -- how I have understood God and not understood God. I invite you to listen to my story and think about your own story -- how you understand God and don’t understand God.

John 3: 16 is probably the most familiar scripture for Christians. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Christians have embraced this verse for generations as a succinct statement of faith. Some have used it as a tool of manipulation. It has been meaningful for my faith throughout my journey.

John 3:16 asserts things about God, three actions of God: God loves the world; God gave the Son; and God provides eternal life. As I tell my story, I will share how my understanding of these three assertions has changed and, hopefully, developed.

Who is Jack and what is his story? Chapter One: “Jack – The Early Days”. I grew up in a Christian family. My father was an Army chaplain. We were a Southern Baptist family: very committed, very open, and very accepting. My early years (birth – 14) was a time of moving. I called these places home: Carlisle, PA; Manassas, VA; Germany, Manassas, VA; Syracuse, NY; Brooklyn, NY; Manassas, VA (while my father

was in Korea); Vienna, VA; Carlisle, PA; Vienna, VA (father in Vietnam). During those years, I attended ten different schools

My family was how I understood God. God loving the world was inseparable from my family loving me. My family was my life and that life was good as long as we were together. Church was what my family did. That included reading bible stories at home, going to Sunday School, and participating in children's choir. This process culminated in my being baptized at the age of eight, then joining the church.

Believing in Jesus as God's Son, in the same way I was my parents' son, was part of what it meant to be part of church. During these years, I experience my first big loss with the death of my grandfather. That was really hard and really scary. Death was like a monster that had come to my family.

It affirmed God's giving eternal life. That idea of living in heaven after here was comforting, yet also troublesome. Eternity seemed like such a long time. Eventually, I became aware of questions faintly gnawing inside me as I was busily living and growing up: "What else is there in life?" "Is this it"?

Chapter Two: "Jack - The Teenage Years and into Young Adulthood". Some things did not change in my life in this stage. Those gnawing questions kept gnawing and became more focused. I became aware of a strong desire to live with integrity, to be a "real person". I wanted to really live the Christian life and figure out just what that meant.

Another consistent feature of life was that I kept moving. There was high school in Virginia, then in Kentucky. There was college in Kentucky, then in Virginia. There was graduate school in Maryland. I moved into married life (Kathy, 1978). I moved into the working world. Work for me meant church. This was a time of clarifying and developing "gifts" away from sports to music and ministry. I felt a hunger to know more about my faith and its tradition, more about the Bible.

I never doubted that God loves the world. I never questioned that God gave the Son Jesus or how that worked. I just accepted it as part of being Christian. What mattered was how you lived and how you treated people. I never questioned that God provides eternal life, though I tried not to think too much about how long eternity was. I just tried to be best person I could be.

Chapter Three: "Jack - Moving into Adulthood". I kept going to school! The mind-opening joy of seminary led me along a journey of learning that was so much more than I ever imagined, yet exactly what I always suspected. These were years of powerful emotion with the death of my grandmother followed a year later by the death of my mother.

This was a time for me to become fully engaged in family life. There was parenthood: the birth of Jonathan, six years, then the adoption of Lisa. I was fully engaged in ministry and the relationships of church. Consistent with me nature, I was always trying to please the congregation, the senior pastor, and my family. It all seemed like trying to follow God.

I began finding my voice in this chapter. I practiced meditation and began to read mystical writers. The writings of Matthew Fox helped me find my voice as I was also finding success and meaning as a pastor apart from music.

This is the time I began to embrace a deeper understanding of “God loves the world”. It doesn’t mean “no scars”. It means growing and moving through fear.

“God gave the Son” -- I became more focused on the God who gave than on the Son who came; more focused on the community of believers here and now and about God presence in that community. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection made this community possible. Jesus’ teachings guided us.

The idea that God provides eternal life was still future focused. It was, though, less a pending judgment day and more a time of gathering and welcoming.

Just as childhood gives way to the realities of growing up, there eventually comes a time that you no longer call yourself a *young* adult, but just an *adult*. It is the time to become who you are, not in some distant future, but in the present. You can still dream. You can still be open to change, new experience, and transformation. You still need to embrace imagination, but the time to live life is now.

Chapter Four – “Jack – the Adult Years (with a hint of middle age)”. A new chapter begins with a familiar theme – Jack goes back to school. I went to Princeton for doctoral studies. The theme that kept me going was a dawning realization, “I can do this!”

Life transitions become harder. There are more deaths: Kathy’s grandmother followed a year later by Kathy’s mother. It was a time for stepping out, leaving home: Vienna Baptist Church where I had been an associate pastor for nineteen years, and Virginia where I had lived the past twenty-eight years. It was a time for stepping up to be the pastor of a church – a time for learning what I think and saying what I think. It was a time for learning the language of Crossroads Church and of Kansas City – a time for finding my voice here and helping you find yours.

The meaning in “God loves the world” is that the greatest force anywhere is love. The enemy is fear. Love displaces fear. God love is image of the underlying force of the universe. God’s love is reflected in the human image of love. Human love imitates the fundamental truth of life.

Affirming “God gave the Son” was aided by theologian Marcus Borg and his idea of distinguishing between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. This latter spirit of Jesus is still available to us, still present to enable us to be present with God.

“God provides eternal life.” Eternal life is not payback time. It’s not vindication for going to church all those years, but a full knowledge of truth and a full participation in God, in the deep truth of reality, in divine love. Eternal life has everything to do with the quality of your life as well as with the quality of the next life. Death is the birth to whatever comes next.

Chapter Five – “Jack today”. I am living in Kansas City and part of a community on the verge of a big life step – buying a church house. You are stepping up to be what you’ve always had potential to be. And I have grown a lot more than the three and a half years I have lived here.

What do I understand about God now? Let’s return to those assertions from John 3:16: God loves the world, God gave the Son, and God provides eternal life. I have continually affirmed them at each stage of my life, though in different ways.

“God loves the world.” Love is still the elemental force of the universe. My capacity to act lovingly -- with justice, compassion, and grace -- reflects how clearly God is focused through my life.

“God gave the Son.” God is big -- really big, beyond comprehension “big”. So, how can we grasp the enormity of God in this time and space universe? How can we perceive God in this life? The basic truth of Christian faith is that ultimate truth was focused in Jesus of Nazareth. This focus was so clear that believers have continued to understand that life as identical to God’s life, as much as we can perceive it.

God giving the Son involves Jesus’ life and death. His death is vitally important. It was not just an accidental tragedy. The cross is the way -- not a punishment visited on the Son by God, but a sign of the full extent of God’s love shown us in Jesus. **The cross is the amount of commitment love requires to transform the world and our little piece of it.**

“God provides eternal life.” Faith means stepping through the gateway of fear, disillusion, and greed to find the keys of the kingdom. Spirit is not something we possess from without. Spirit emerges from within us. She is the co-creation of God and us. The Pentecost Spirit erupted from within that gathered group of disciples when the reality of Jesus’ life, teachings, and actions, and the implication of their mission and their giftedness hit them fully.

They challenge us to live today as Jesus would, with the full measure of insight, action, courage, and joy that awakens the divine within each of us. In that awakening, as we gather to be church and as we scatter to be church, as we awaken to the divine presence and the divine calling, the Spirit will erupt from within our gathering. The Spirit will send us into life with courage, with compassion, and with joy.

I still don’t understand that much about God. But I am not afraid of questions. I find myself excited by new insights and drawn to people who exude that Spirit – people who are living in that courage.

I stand before you today as your friend and your brother in Christ, to tell you honestly that all we need to know about God, we know; yet we’ll learn more. All we need to be church in an authentic and powerful way, we possess; yet we’ll receive more. All you need to have eternal life now and in the future, you already have; yet, there is more to come. This much I understand.

I invite and encourage you to take advantage of times to meet with me in smaller groups, to talk with me and others in this community. It’s not that I have all or most of the answers. But it’s why I’m here – to share my experience and perspectives with you. If you’re not participating in house church or Sunday school or one of our special studies or in one to one meetings with me, then you’re not get your money’s worth.

Looking ahead to the coming year, I want to see you, hear your story, and walk the path of life with you. Together, we can come to a clearer understanding of each other and of God. That’s the meaning of our last song. “Shine, Jesus.” Shine in our hearts and in this world so that, when people see Jesus in you, they will come to understand God more clearly. So shine.