

WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.1.2020



What Do I Want When I Want to Believe?

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Philippians 2:1-10

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,



and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

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Last Wednesday we began a journey that will lead us to the foot of the cross and then to an empty tomb on Easter morning. The journey is called Lent. Lent lasts forty days plus six Sundays – it’s a time for us to examine our faith, and ourselves – so that when we get to where we are going on Easter Sunday we have a deeper appreciation for the amazing gift of resurrection hope.

This year during Lent we are going to focus on what it means to be a disciple – or a follower – of Jesus. Our guide along the journey is going to be one of Jesus’ disciples from a long, long time ago – a man named Augustine.

You may or may not have heard about Augustine, but your life (and your faith) have been influenced by his thoughts. I won’t do this every week during Lent, but here at the beginning, let me tell you a little bit about him.

Augustine was born in 354 in northern Africa. He excelled at school and went across the Mediterranean Sea to Carthage to pursue his studies. He lived in a manner we might call a “fast and loose” for a while before moving to Milan, Italy where he became a professor. While in Milan, Augustine converted to Christianity and was baptized when he was 33 years old. Eventually, Augustine ended up back in northern Africa where he was a Bishop of a region called Hippo. He was a prolific writer – the author of 94 different works. His ideas shaped the minds of the leaders of the church – including names you have heard of: John Calvin, Reinhold Neihbur, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to name a few.

I could spend several years’ worth of sermons trying to unpack what Augustine taught us about following Jesus as one his disciples (wouldn’t that be fun?!) – but there is one quote that gets to the core of what Augustine was about.

In his book called *Confessions* he wrote: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord,



and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

In *his* heart, Augustine knew that to be a person of faith was to be on a journey. A journey from the place we are – where there is brokenness and imperfection – to a place where God’s vision is complete – which is our heart’s true home.

It’s a journey from what is to a place where what God has promised will be.

Augustine knew that the temptation – in these lives that we lead – is to get distracted – to take our eyes off of the goal.

The way to tell if we are distracted is by examining what is behind the things we love.

Augustine believed that there are ordered ways we love – when what we want aligns with what God intends. This is a way of loving that leaves us feeling settled and peaceful – as if we were home.

Then there are disordered ways to love – when what we want is out of synch with what God intends. This way of loving leaves us empty, and unfulfilled... restless.

From now until Easter, as we think about how to live as Jesus’ disciples, we are going to explore some of the things we love – and we are going to examine whether what we want aligns with God’s promise, or not.

Today the question is about our love of knowledge – and what we want when we want to believe (or know) something.

Our Scripture is a part of the letter to the Philippians. Scholars believe this was an ancient hymn that the earliest followers of Jesus (well before Augustine, even) used to proclaim what they believed. Listen with me for a word from God.

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Do you remember what it was like on the first day of school?
When you had fresh notebooks.
Newly sharpened pencils, or your favorite kind of pen.
Folders that had tabs you had already organized by subject.

Do you remember what the classroom was like – whether it was middle school, or high school or college – how everything was laid out and ready? Or when you would get that syllabus and see that roadmap of everything you were going to study and learn? How exciting that was?

Do you remember – on that first day of school - how you could begin to see that the things you already learned in the last few years were going to prepare you to take yet another step to build upon that knowledge?

How – with *this* year – in *this* class – you were going to be that much closer to understanding a subject?

How – after you had done all the reading and all the homework and taken all the tests – you might come even closer to being able to see the truth?

Of all the things God has created, perhaps the most amazing and mysterious is the grey matter between our ears.

Just consider what has happened because of the ways human beings have harnessed the power of our brains: medical cures and treatments, flights to the moon, wonders of architecture and art, literature that plumbs the depths of what it is to be human, systems of government that allow for billions of us to share a planet, systems of belief that help us consider the majesty of God.

We are all built – we are all created – with an appetite to learn. That feature about us is a gift from God. To exercise our brains – to build upon our own knowledge and the knowledge of others is...I think...what God intends for us!

But, sometimes, and I'm not sure when or how this happens, but, sometimes, it's not actually knowledge we are after.



It's what that knowledge gets us.

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A little while ago, Anna read the story of Adam and Eve's temptation in the garden. Now, I'm less interested in whether or not you believe in the historical accuracy of that story than I am in hoping you understand what it was that Adam and Eve were tempted to do.

The serpent didn't tempt Adam and Eve with being smarter.
Why would that ever be a sin?

The temptation was to be like God.
What the serpent offered wasn't about gaining knowledge for learning's sake.

It wasn't about building knowledge to get closer to the truth.
It was about using knowledge to gain power...and control.

And that is something that sounds familiar to me. Because it is tempting. And because I see evidence of us falling into that temptation when I take stock of the world around.

We live in a time and place where there are a lot of people who are determined to influence our thoughts...to convince us of what we ought to believe...to try to win us over (or keep us aligned) with their point of view.

Yes – I am talking about the impending election season – full of debates, advertisements, town hall meetings, campaign rallies, and billions and billions of dollars. But I'm also talking about voices in the marketplace, and over the media, and in the company, and, even, in our social circles that shape our thinking.

We've come to accept that intense polarization in our culture is just normal – that we are each assigned a particular lane – where independent thinking is



frowned upon and we're all expected to toe the party line.

And what that reveals to me is that what is most important aren't the facts, or a consistency of thought, or even the truth.

What seems most important is whether or not you can consolidate enough people around an idea, or an ideology, or a party platform, or a social narrative that will give it power.

It doesn't matter if it's true. It matters if it works.

And that is a perversion of the ways we are supposed to use our brains. It is incongruous with how we are created to pursue knowledge. And I think we feel that, don't we?

I think we know this path does not lead toward home.

The instinct is not new. 1,700 years ago Augustine wrote what sounds now like a prophesy:

"Their love for "truth" takes the form that they love something else and want this object of their love to be the truth; and because they do not wish to be deceived, they do not wish to be persuaded that they are mistaken."

It's like Augustine was reading our mail or watching our news.

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The alternative, a more ordered way to love learning and knowledge and belief, has the advantage of leaving us feeling settled, even though it doesn't promise us personal gain.

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit," Paul writes, "but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..."



The way Jesus used his mind was to serve.
The powerful and the haughty. The low and the despised.
Jesus channeled his mind, and his heart, and his body for the sake of the
world – for you and for me.

Jesus offers his life as a pattern. And I want to be clear –

Story of Katherine Johnson

Not what we believe but who – trust

