
UNKNOWING FAITH

HEBREWS 13:1-8, 15-16

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2019,
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Duke University's motto in Latin is *eruditio et religio*. Knowledge and religion. The knowledge part is not surprising for a major global research 1 university. Students are accepted into Duke, in many ways, due to how much they know or demonstrate that they know or can come to know. Then upon arrival, the ongoing tasks of learning and research have to do with seeking knowledge and eventually gaining more knowledge. We want to know more about law or the environment or theology or business or engineering or public policy or medicine or nursing. Universities recruit scholars who can increase the body of knowledge in diverse fields of thought and practice. Professors are hired for what they know and how much they know. Knowledge production is a part of the tenure process for faculty; if you don't produce knowledge and contribute to the body of knowledge in terms of academic scholarship, then perhaps you won't receive tenure but only receive the theme song, "Nah nah nah, nah nah nah, hey hey hey, goodbye!" All because knowledge is so prized!

And at a place like Duke, we also hear a lot about knowledge in service to society. Not just service but knowledge in service. As humans we want to know and be in the know. Even as Christians, we're guided by St. Anselm's motto, 'faith seeking understanding.' There's a hunger or drive for more knowledge. There's an inclination toward knowing. We are at Duke, a top ten ranked institution—aren't we supposed to have all the answers and be an oasis of knowledge? Let's hear it for *eruditio!*

But in the light of faith, and in light of the letter to the Hebrews, maybe the Christian life isn't about knowing, but unknowing, even in relation to this epistle. One commentator said that "Like its own description of Melchizedek (Heb 7:3), [the letter to the] Hebrews appears in the [biblical] canon 'without father or mother or genealogy.'" That is, there's so much we don't know about the letter. For instance, authorship is not clear. Early 3rd century church father Origen said, "But who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows." This letter has an unknown quality but it's still in the canon. It's still a part of our life of faith although it's unknown in many ways.

We don't have to know everything about Hebrews for it to be a part of the life of Christian discipleship. We don't have to know everything about God for God to be God. Maybe real knowledge is what actually informs us about how much we don't actually know or need to know. But the one thing we do know is that we don't know everything there is to know. You know what I mean?

In the 14th century, there was an anonymous work written on Christian mysticism. It's called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This text is a spiritual guide on contemplative prayer and it suggests that the way to know God is to abandon consideration of God's activities and attributes, and surrender one's mind and ego to the realm of "unknowing," which is where you meet God. It's *via negativa*. Unknowing, not knowing. This writing teaches people that in order to come to know God, you have to unknow. It teaches one to seek God, not through knowledge but through love and states God can be loved but can't be thought. And in the cloud of unknowing, in the darkness of the unknown, is where one meets God.

One might say that there's a kind of 'cloud of unknowing' around this letter to the Hebrews and even if you enter its unknown, strange nature, you'll still discover God, not by knowing but through unknowing. Hebrews is believed to be one long sermon and the writer is known as a preacher. Like some contemporary sermons, this one is a bit cloudy to me. It sounds more like a laundry list or bullet points of Sunday church announcements without any real connection. "Let mutual love continue... Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers... Remember those who are in prison... Let marriage be held in honor by all... Keep your lives free from the love of money... Remember your leaders... Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever..." As a sermon, I want to tell the preacher, this is too abrupt. The sermon has no flow. He needs to work on his transitions. Where's the focus?

As teacher of preaching Paul Scott Wilson would say, “Where’s the one theme, the one doctrine, the one image, the one mission?” It seems to be all over the place, preaching about every single topic—the ministry of hospitality, the prison visitation program, the couples’ ministry, stewardship, discipleship, Jesus.

It’s all a bit cloudy to me actually and maybe that’s the point of it all. You have to enter the cloud to get to the Christ because in the life of faith, everything is not always clear. It can be a bit cloudy. We are not ‘know it all’ Christians. We are unknowing ones.

What do I mean? I mean that so much of the Christian life happens without us knowing how it all happens. The Hebrews sermon highlights this: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” “Without knowing it.” Without knowledge. Unknowingly. Unaware.

How often do we do things and things happen or things happen to us, without our even knowing it? So much in life happens without us knowing how it all happens, without us fully comprehending. This isn’t unusual in the biblical witness. We see it all over scripture. In the book of Acts, the apostle Paul passes through Ephesus and meets some disciples. He asks them whether they received the Spirit when they became believers and they respond by saying, “We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” They were disciples but did not know about the Holy Spirit. Paul lays hands on them and the Holy Spirit comes upon them. As a result, they speak in tongues and prophesy. One gift is intelligible, the prophesying. The other gift is unintelligible or incomprehensible, the tongues. Both are gifts of the Spirit. The unknowing or incomprehensibility is part of the life of faith in the power of the Spirit. We just don’t know everything.

Even the prophet Isaiah raises a very human question in his journey that also confirms this: “When I expected it to yield grapes why did it yield wild grapes?” There are things that we just don’t know and can’t explain. We have an unknowing faith. Even when the disciples are in the boat with Jesus and a storm rises on the water and Jesus stills the storm, Jesus has to ask them, “Why are you afraid?” God is with them in the boat without them knowing it. They don’t comprehend this so they fear. They just don’t know.

We live an unknowing Christian life. Yet, we continue to act even if we don’t know how it will all turn out. Your action or words impact others in ways you will never know for good or bad. So much of life happens without us knowing how it all happens and this should challenge our rigid faith in certainty to become unknown.

And there’s so much grace in unknowing. According to the Hebrews preacher, we might be in the presence of angels without even knowing it. There’s an experience of grace in the unknowing. We might be walking beside grace and not even know it. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Unknowing is not only about not knowing everything but it is also about undoing what you know or unlearning some things. In the case of hospitality to strangers, there’s a call here to unknow what we may think we know about strangers—that they are dangerous, that they are to be feared, that they are not to be trusted but encaged, walled in, bound by borders, when the truth is they may be God’s angel for us. The Hebrews preacher might as well say these words with the Statue of Liberty:

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"* (Emma Lazarus)

This call to extend hospitality to strangers is an allusion to when Abraham and Sarah were at the oaks of Mamre welcoming three strangers who brought the good news of a promised son, even in their old age (Gen 18:1-15). Good news comes from the strange. And welcoming the stranger is a virtue all throughout scripture. The

Israelites were once strangers and receive such commands as, “You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exod 23:9).

The Greek word for hospitality (*philoxenia*) literally means “love of the strange.” Former chief rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks notes that love of stranger is more prominent than love of neighbor in the Old Testament. Love of the strange, hospitality, is a Christian virtue.

It’s prominent in the early church. We heard it in the gospel reading this morning—Jesus tells the host of a dinner at which he was a guest, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14). This is counterintuitive because the invitees are strange outsiders, not familiar insiders—the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind—and they can’t give anything in return. They just receive the hospitality and they may not be angels. The host doesn’t know and will not know but still loves the strange and extends hospitality.

And this openness to the stranger is an opening to God. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” On the road to Emmaus, after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples don’t know that it’s Jesus talking to them but they extend hospitality to him and without knowing it, entertain God (Luke 24). God is in the unknowing and Christ was a stranger in so many ways that at one point he identifies himself as a stranger—“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt 25). The incarnate God is a stranger, unknowing our faith. This is why St. Benedict’s rule for his monastic order stated, “The guest comes, Christ comes.” There’s so much grace in unknowing and that grace can be God.

A Jesuit brother worked as a doorkeeper at a college in Spain. His job was to greet all the students, faculty and visitors who knocked on the great wooden door. This brother had a wonderful way of reminding himself to be hospitable to all visitors, and welcome them as if they were Jesus himself. When he heard someone knocking on the door, he would say, “I’m coming, Lord!” (James Martin).

Love of the strange is love of Christ, without knowing it. This doesn’t mean that there isn’t risk involved because there is. To let a stranger into your house or life is always a risk. Strangers might be “angels,” but they might not be. We don’t know. So this Hebrews call to hospitality is a call to ongoing vulnerability to the unknown other, even the other who might harm you. Hospitality has potential hostility built into it. We don’t know but we have to unknow what we think we know about strangers and extend hospitality to strangers and love the strange.

By doing so, we might unknow exclusion and tribalism and embody an open-door policy on the borders of our hearts. Unknowing our faith may lead us to come to know God differently. We may do things, like extend hospitality, that lead us to God without knowing it. There’s grace in unknowing because there’s God in the cloud of unknowing.

We don’t have to know everything about every subject or have answers to every question in an exam or be the smartest person in the room in order for God to be present. Regardless of how much we know or don’t know, God will show up in strange places and in strange people, without our knowing it because God is in the unknowing. God is in the strange.

This academic year, you will have the opportunity to encounter strange ideas and strange people—but will you love the strange and the stranger? Will you extend hospitality? Because even at Duke with a mascot of a blue devil, there are some angels walking around. And who knows? Some may even be in this room.