

Most of you know that I plan sermons anywhere from 3 to 6 months in advance, so sermon titles may or may not be a good fit for the finished product when you hear it on Sunday morning. Now, today we can get by with “The Other John 3:16” which of course refers to the sixteenth verse of chapter three in the Epistle of John as compared to 3:16 in the Gospel of John. John 3:16 in the gospel is the most recognized Bible verse EVER! FIRST John 3:16 not so much, but it has its own distinct value for our Christian lives.

If I could retitile the sermon (on the fly) this morning I might choose, “This Is How We Know.” That’s because the first thing we should pay close attention to in FIRST John 3:16 are the first five words, repeated three verses later in verse 19: *This is how we know...* “Knowing” something means having intelligence.

A “study” which was actually a review of 63 studies of intelligence and religion conducted over the past century (1928-2012) apparently shows that in 53 of the studies there was an inverse relationship between having religious beliefs (and/or performing religious rituals) and intelligence. In other words, non-believers scored higher than religious people on intelligence tests.

But co-author of the study, Jordan Silberman, says that it would be a mistake to assume the findings mean if you’re a believer, you’re a few fries short of a Happy Meal. “I’m sure there are intelligent religious people and unintelligent atheists out there,” Silberman says. “The findings pertain to the average intelligence of religious and non-religious people, but they don’t necessarily apply to any single person. Knowing that a person is religious would not lead me to bet any money on whether or not the person is intelligent.” Or as the conductor of the study, Miron Zuckerman (a psychologist at the University of Rochester) offers, “It is truly the wrong message to take from here that if I believe in God I must be stupid.” Fair enough, but maybe not...enough.

*The Independent* newspaper noted that the researchers used a very narrow definition of *intelligence* in the study, defining it as “the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly, and learn from experience.” Sounds good, but it excludes other forms of intelligence, such as creative and emotional intelligence (forms of intelligence more easily assessed independent of educational stimulus). But for me, the most important observation came from public statements from both Miron Zuckerman and the study’s co-author, Jordan Silberman. When asked why he thought the meta-analysis seemed to favor the atheist over the believer, Silberman said he suspected it had more to do with “intelligent” people having less of a “need” for religion. Is it just me, or does that translate as “pride”?

If you fancy yourself smart, and indeed perhaps you are, you are prone to pride. Intellectual pride leads to a false sense of self-sufficiency coupled with a lack of teachability. You do not bow your knee to anyone. If anything, others should bow to you.

From the very beginning John’s epistle urges us to experience God, but John doesn’t put the weight of our Christian life on experience only. There are things John believes are vital for us to KNOW. He balances our fragile experience of God with the objective knowledge of God’s unchanging love, because our thoughts and conscience can get all tangled up in questions of self-doubt.

This especially happens among people who are intent on living for God. They often worry more than others that they've done or are doing something that offends God or that God won't forgive. This is well-known in religious psychology. Earnest believers get their thoughts churned up, repeatedly accusing themselves of sins long ago forgiven. In their mind they hear the whispers: "I'm supposed to believe God, yet I've sinned. And I've done it before. Can God really forgive me this time?" John wants his dear parishioners to know that God doesn't intend this crippling kind of moral life for us. God wants us free from sin and free enough to live fully even though we've sinned.

Who doesn't sin, I ask you? It's just that once we're living in God and God in us, it's no longer our nature to sin all the time. Our joy and focus is toward God and others. The fact that we're bothered by our sin means after all that we are definitely turned toward God. John assures his readers that God knows who we are and what we've done. God knows our failings. In fact, God knows everything. God knows we want to change, even if that frightens us. God knows we want to love, even if we can't figure out how to do it or we don't always do so consistently. Most important is that God loves us.

John knows this first and foremost. John knows how much God loves us. It is verifiable knowledge. Such knowledge is more critical than any moral deliberations that besiege our mind. We trust this kind of God because of who Jesus was. That's why God commands us to believe in Jesus. It's a command from God that essentially says, "Believe that Jesus is like me!" God's loving character and forgiving nature are found in Jesus. That's not to say that Jesus doesn't have high expectations for us; but more importantly Jesus assures us that God loves us.

We are used to the idea of religious charity. Many non-churched people in the U.S. think that religion exists only for doing charity. However, in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds the statement that God loving us should lead to our loving others was a mind-bender. If God loved us, we should love God, right? Yes, but John insists we demonstrate love for God by loving one another. We recognize Jesus' love in that he "*laid down his life for us.*" So it follows that we also surrender our lives for others (although not just by dying). Such love or lack of love is obvious by our actions when we see people who need help. Will we help them? Or will we pass by thinking someone else should help them?

John encourages his precious children to continue loving others both by what they SAY and what they DO. Loving others confirms that God's truth is in us. Therefore we have confidence that we are in heaven's family even if our hearts condemn us for our lack of compassion and charity. God is greater than any thought that might be in our heart, and God knows everything. We are fortunate if our hearts (and consciences) do not condemn us, for we can have confidence with God, which must mean confidence in prayer because John then says we receive whatever we ask for and we obey God's commandments and do what pleases God.

God's most important commands are that we believe in Jesus, trust him and obey him, and of course that we love one another. We demonstrate our life in God when we obey God's commandments.

If you're thinking that John is playing only one tune, it's really part of a larger medley we need to hear. It's a glorious revelation that he sets to music, telling us that the truth of God's love has been shown to the world in Jesus and now dwells in us. There's no mechanical relationship between God and us, where every sin we commit must be exactly counterbalanced by grief and repentance on our part. We don't live

with some divine accounting machine that numbers our failings where we must take equal and opposite actions for every evil we commit. We are part of God's family now. Without that knowledge we can wander aimlessly and spend our lives in trivial pursuits, fueled by our own oversized PRIDE.

No wonder the intelligence and religion study I mentioned earlier concludes that the higher the "intelligence," the more likely the person is to challenge established norms and authority. Pride is unleashed. Perhaps nowhere does that kind of pride run amok more so than in academia. Lillian Daniel, professor and minister at First Congregational Church, Dubuque, Iowa, has observed, "There is a certain peer pressure as one moves up the educational ladder to dismiss all religion as fundamentalism. It's one of the last acceptable biases in an environment that prides itself on being open-minded." Prideful prejudice?

If we give in to that pride—particularly its highest form, which is putting ourselves in the position of God—then there is no place for God. John assures us that the pride of our hearts does not have to have the last word: "*This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything*" (3:19-20).

There's a long history of disagreement among biblical scholars about whether those two verses reflect the severity of God or the mercy of God. But in 1527 in his lectures on 1 John, Luther taught that it was God's mercy that the Apostle John was describing. "Although at first resisted by Calvinists and Catholics alike, it has won the day among most Christians today" writes Raymond Brown in his commentary, *The Epistles of John*, p. 459.

Thank goodness. Maybe it's not that religious people are less "intelligent" than atheists. Maybe, in truth, religious people are the most intelligent of all. Not because they refuse to accept the facts, but because they DO accept the facts—two facts in particular. First, that "There is a God." And then the all-important second fact that: "I am not God."

The OTHER John 3:16 says, "*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.*" We can enjoy the freedom to be honest about who we are with all our warts, our morning grumpiness, our silly fears of swallowing insects, and hundreds of other idiosyncrasies that people who really know us and love us have to put up with. And of course we can be open with God, speaking freely to God in prayer as Jesus did when he called God "Abba, Father."

He didn't do that only when he was cringing in pain on the cross. He did it deliberately, daily and regularly out of his deep trust in God. We too can pray with openness and live in God's presence with joy, knowing that he lives in us. It's the INTELLIGENT way to live.

And God, our heavenly Father, wouldn't want it any other way. Amen.