

“Just a Taste?”  
Ephesians 3:14-21  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
July 29, 2018  
Rev. Glen Bell

John Leedy was a participant in our Pastoral Development Seminars several years ago. John is an associate pastor at University Presbyterian Church in Austin. Several days ago, he celebrated the highlight of his sabbatical: walking the final section of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela.

The *camino* is a Christian pilgrimage, walked by Christians for hundreds and hundreds of years. They walk, carefully, prayerfully, joyfully, across northern Spain. The trip culminates at the Cathedral of Santiago – the Cathedral of Saint James – in Compostela.

John walked from Leon to Ponferrada to Villafranca de Bierzo, from Villefranca to O Celeiro to Triacastela to Sarria, from Sarria to Portomarin to Arzua, and from Arzua to Podrouzo to Santiago de Compostela. His posts and photos include cold rain and loneliness and thunderstorms, blisters and falls and exhaustion.

But they also include honeysuckle and lavender and sunshine, roses and wood smoke and cool spring water. They include cathedrals and prayers and doxologies and sunsets and new friends on the journey.

John celebrated the Feast of St. James in Santiago. He wrote these words. “I covet your prayers as I complete this last stage of the pilgrimage, knowing God is still opening my heart and mind.”

God is opening John’s heart and mind, even as the journey has concluded. And God yearns today to open ours as well.

God yearns to embrace us with beauty, in the quiet of worship – and in the glory of organ or soloist or band. God yearns to welcome us with awe and wonder, enabling us to see beyond our vision and listen beyond our hearing. God yearns to transform us from the inside out, leaving no wound unhealed, no gift unpolished, no trust and service unrealized.

God yearns for every blessing, for *everything*, for you and me.

But that sounds like too much. Lost in the routine of our days and the rhythm of our routines, that all sounds like way too much. We hear about the riches of God’s glory, but perhaps all we want is a little peace and quiet. We hear about the power of the Holy Spirit, but maybe we just want to be left alone. We hear the breadth and length and height and depth, but maybe our heart still feels stiff and small. Christ yearns to fill us with all the fullness of God, but maybe, maybe just a taste is all we want.

Our lives are filled not only with light but also darkness, so many of us have learned to ratchet down our hopes, to reduce and package up our spiritual expectations. We have taught ourselves not to want too much.

On other occasions, we want only what *we* want, exactly when and how *we* want it: strength in the ways *we* want it, love in *our* timing, spiritual growth only if it enables us to enjoy *what we want*.

It doesn’t work that way. Awe and wonder do not happen on schedule. God doesn’t come when we whistle. But I believe we can put ourselves in places where we become more aware of the Lord’s presence, where we can better open ourselves to the fullness of God.

Where do I discover awe and wonder? Sometimes I experience the powerful presence of God when I have confessed my sins, accepted God’s forgiveness, and determined anew to live for Jesus. Sometimes I experience God’s presence when I am completely off the map: when I least expect it, when I have messed up yet again, when I am lonely or blistered or exhausted.

Sometimes it comes when I open my heart to more. Sometimes it comes when I am sure my heart and spirit are broken.

There is no special formula, you see, no guarantee of God's appearing with a glass of milk and a warm blanket.

Instead, there is great mystery here. The Apostle Paul prays that you and I may comprehend immeasurable beauty and know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge. Listen to that slowly again: "to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

How can we *know* something that is *beyond knowledge*?

George Stroup points us to being known by God, rather than knowing with our heart and mind. "This mystery," he writes, "cannot be discovered . . . It can only be received by revelation. . . . When I say I know something, I usually mean I am the subject of this activity, the one who knows. . . . Revelation stands all this on its head. In revelation, I am not the one who knows, but the one who is known. What I know is the experience of being known by someone other than myself."

Perhaps that is where God's fullness dwells, when we know our flaws and foibles and failings far too well, but at the same moment find the strength in God's grace to trust God.

In our brokenness, through the cold rain and thunderstorms and all our falls, we learn that we cannot find our way home on our own. Life is not a permanent vacation, not the perfection of uninterrupted leisure. No, it is a pilgrimage to the heart of God. We need help. We need direction. Perhaps in that moment you and I find our heart opening, opening just a bit.

This is what I believe. If we would be surrounded by awe and wonder, if we would be filled by God's Spirit, we will allow ourselves to be truly known by the Lord.

It is not an easy journey. As Robert Wicks writes, "Due to our lack of complete trust in God's revelation that we are made in the divine image, most of us get caught up in trying to be extraordinary. We become insecure. We are tempted to rest our sense of self on something less than God's love for us. We waste our energy, worrying about whether we are liked, respected, effective, or as good as other people."

Our images of others can lead to resentment. Our images of others can seem to be an obstacle.

It is inevitable. We rub up against others on our journey of discipleship. They are in the way, out of sync, wrongheaded, wronghearted, misinformed, just a bother. But in this pilgrimage toward Christ, we are found as God's children, never as chosen child, as one among sisters and brothers, never the only one. The *camino* simply could not have been the spiritual experience John discovered if he had been the only person on the path.

That just doesn't seem fair, does it? There are so many people around us who *ying* when we *yang*, who hurry when we are sauntering along slowly, enjoying God's beauty - or who are abysmally tardy when we in a mad dash for the finish line.

Can there be an experience of salvation only for me? Can there be the joy of revelation, learning the grace of God in Christ, if the fullness is only for me, never for them - whoever "they" may be?

No. No, I don't believe so.

I believe we cannot travel spiritually, cannot grow in faith, cannot develop as disciples if we are not open to a "there" before us that is different than the "here" right now and if we are not truly open to others.

Austin Channing Brown is a writer and speaker. She is the author of *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World of Whiteness*. The text is a letter to the church, a call to action, a memoir and a record of her lover's quarrel with the church.

She writes this. "Christians talk about love a lot. It's one of our favorite words.

"But I have found this love to be largely inconsequential. Love is not a prize to be owed, rather a moral obligation we must demonstrate. Love cannot dissolve into a demand for grace, for niceness, for endless patience.

"I am not interested in love that is aloof, that refuses hard work, instead demanding only a bite-sized education that doesn't transform anything. I am not interested in a love that refuses to see systems and structures of injustice, preferring to ask itself only about personal intentions.

“I need a love that is troubled by injustice, a love that is provoked to anger when black children lie dead in the streets. A love that has no tolerance for hate, no excuses for racist decisions, no contentment in the status quo. I need a love that is fierce in its resilience and sacrifice. I need a love that chooses justice.”

“ . . . All of this comes with living, with struggling, with believing in the possibility of change.”

That is the path of our spiritual life, in God’s grace and God’s prodding, becoming more than we are, living, struggling, changing.

Right there we reach the crescendo of this scripture lesson – believing, trusting in the possibility of change. Right there we hear from the Bible: God is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine. God is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine.

This is what enables us to continue living and struggling. This is the only thing that empowers us toward genuine, foundational change.

Sisters and brothers, lean into God’s awe and wonder. Open your heart to the shock and scandal of God within you. Lean into the power of God at work within you to make a difference and change our world.

This is the reason we are strengthened in our inner being. This is why we are rooted and grounded in love. This is why we are filled with God’s fullness. That we may rest in God’s grace – and God’s power at work within us, we may accomplish far more than we imagine.

So, don’t do it. Don’t listen to those voices that say the church is declining, that you and I live in a dangerous world so we’ve got to hunker down and keep ourselves safe, that it’s just not realistic that you and I would be the ones to visit the sick and teach the children and work with our youth and renounce our privilege and tear down injustice and share the gospel and make changes here in Sarasota.

Don’t listen to that!

Instead, listen to God. Remember God’s power and presence, God’s power and presence within you and me – that we may be the change, much more than we might imagine.

Sisters and brothers, let it be so. Make it so. To the glory of God.