

"To Know God" (Ursula Rogers)
May 2, 2010
Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, GA

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

I love my family and friends.

I love getting Facebook notifications.

I love the woody gasoline infused scent of my grandfather's garage.

I love underground rap.

I love eating sushi with my parents, reading until I fall asleep, travelling, watching 'Scrubs', exploring the city with my friends.

I love God.

We can at least agree on the last one; we love God. Since I love God, and I know that God is love, then I know God. It's just common math. After all, I've worked to know God. I've been attending Bible studies since seventh grade, I *lead* a Bible study, I've studied the New and Old Testament at the Westminster Schools. I've even studied other faiths and concluded that *God is Love, and that's all*. I placed an equal sign between God and love. I considered myself enlightened and called it a day.

I was born in Japan. I spent my first six years surrounded by Shintos, Buddhists, Christians, and atheists. I was taught that the religious traditions of peaceful people were all acceptable. After having moved to Atlanta (nestled snugly in the "Bible Belt"), my ideal world of religious tolerance was interrupted on September 11, 2001. For the first time I heard about a religion called Islam. Some said it was a religion that advocated violence. Others said it was not a religion at all. It became clear to my family that we did not know enough about Islam. In an effort to change this, five years later we hosted a *hijab* wearing, Arabic speaking, Egyptian girl named Esraa.

I could not stop returning to my equation (God=Love) knowing there was more to it; I'm not crazy about math in the first place. Seeing the acts of hate, violence, and fear alongside beautiful acts of love only made me question this unequivocal conclusion that: God=love.

After all, what even is love? How do we come to know it? How do we come to know God, and how are the two so intrinsically connected?

Today's lesson from the book of Revelation gives us some insight: "And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." This allegory depicting the final state of the church doesn't only apply to "end times." We can see this as an image of paradise, God's kingdom coming to earth to be present among us. When God became human in the form of Jesus, incarnate through the Holy Spirit and Mary, we were given the gift of equality. We have divinity instilled in us alongside our humanity. C.S. Lewis reflects on this concept, "You don't have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body." This body that our soul inhabits parallels the Earth being a vessel for the kingdom of God, as we see in Revelation.

When Esraa, my Egyptian homestay sister, first came to stay with us, I saw her as someone I would learn from at a distance. Perhaps I could gain a few funny stories of cultural misunderstandings, which I certainly did. I did not expect to grow close to her nor understand her. I secretly thought that I would be able to convert her to a faith, in hindsight, that I did not understand, Christianity.

Esraa's arrival in our home dramatically altered the path of my own faith journey. Her faithfully fastened *hijab*, completely covered body, and strange eating habits (especially during *Ramadan*) set her apart from the other students at our school. It was difficult for everyone (including me) not to judge her. I did not yet know how alike we were. I began to grow accustomed, even fond, of her oddities: burning hemp scented incense in her bedroom, her fear of Bach, our chow-golden retriever mix. I could even forgive her for eating all my favorite cereal, Honey Bunches of Oats. We spent a lot of time together, and gradually our heated religious debates became intimate conversations about our faiths; we became sisters.

We became sisters in the light of understanding through the process of incarnation, that is recognizing God in other human beings. My year with Esraa helped me to grow exponentially in my faith in showing me what the much preached about compassion really meant. We were able to see God in one another despite our many differences.

Knowing God takes more than just studying scripture, going to church, and reading about theology. None of that holds real value without the element of incarnation. The only means we have to know God and our fellow beings is through the same compassion that God showed us by becoming flesh.

John's message conveys that the best way to understand God and love is to see this quote from Revelation as God joining humanity. In turn we are given the chance to join God. We can understand God by becoming incarnate, the same way God did through empathy and compassion, essentially putting ourselves in others' shoes.

God inhabited flesh, and now "the home of God is among mortals." This great equalizer, incarnation, permits God to live among us, in husbands and wives, relatives, children, teachers, convicts, friends. Karen Armstrong, theologian and founder of the Charter for Compassion, demands that "we dethrone ourselves, habitually and reflexively, from the center of our worlds and practice putting others there." The humility and selflessness she necessitates are at the core of the teachings of Jesus, the *incarnate* Son of God and Son of Man. We cannot know God without coming to know the rest of creation in which God is present.

This concept of incarnation is crucial both in personal relationships and in our general interactions. In the words of the late writer David Foster Wallace, "everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness, because it's so socially repulsive, but it's pretty much the same for all of us, deep down." However, as humans, and as Christians, we have been shown by God's human son, that through love and discipline, we can truly care for other people.

Through God's incarnate son, God knows my human fears, my human imperfections, and shares my very human joys. In humility, God became one of us, so that we could be like God, and embrace the divinity that is within and recognize our kindred divinity in others.

Our greatness as a church, a community, a nation, can be measured by our ability to recognize the humanity and divinity in each person, and in our treatment of the "least and last." An American Buddhist monk once said, "True compassion does not distinguish between healer and wounded, but regards them as equals." God is no longer distant; God is among us as a friend, a teacher, a stranger, anyone.

We have been given this gift of heaven on earth if we choose to live in it through the example of God's compassion. We are challenged to know God by knowing others. We must know love to know God.