

Welcome

There's a Buddhist parable that's over three thousand years old. The parable tells of a group of blind men who come upon an elephant. They've never encountered an elephant before, and they want to know what it is, so they all feel it. The first grabs the trunk, and says it's like a snake. The next grabs its ear, and says it's like a fan. Another feels its side, and says it's like a sturdy wall. Another grabs its tail and says it's a rope. One feels its leg and says it's like a tree. The last feels a tusk and insists it's a spear.

The parable usually ends there, before the elephant can get grumpy about all these people grabbing at it. And the point is to get us to consider how limited our perspectives are. It's entirely possible for us to be right - much like each of the men was right about the particularly part of the elephant they felt - and still miss the bigger picture.

As you might imagine, this parable is really popular in religious circles. I can't tell you how many times I've been in a conversation about God with some friends who don't follow Jesus who bring up this particular story. They want to suggest that maybe, as a Jesus-follower, my perspective is limited, that I don't have the whole picture about who God is. That maybe I've got ahold of one piece of God.

And again, it's not hard to argue that my perspective is limited. Have you ever been in a Bible study where everyone was asked to share what they think of a verse, and someone in the group shares something that's just totally bonkers? I was in a Bible study one time when someone was talking about wanting to buy a new car, and they read, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," so they knew God wanted them to have that new car.

I'm like 99.9% sure that's not what Paul meant when he wrote that while he was locked in prison! But push back and you hear, "That's what this verse means to me."

This is a tricky problem... God calls us all into personal relationships. God wants us to experience God for ourselves, to hear from God in prayer and scripture. To encounter God in service. But... how do we know if our experience of God is right and good? After all, our perspective *is* limited. We're not infallible. Far from it.

Experience is a way we know God. A really important way. But since we're limited and imperfect, there are limits. We can be wrong.

And that's why we need each other. In fact, God gives us the gift of community so that we can measure and judge our experiences of God *together*. So let's begin by experiencing God together, in the gift of worship. Stand with me and sing as we celebrate the God who brings us together!

Message

[Series Master Slide] During the Summer, we're asking one basic question: How do we know God? We began last week with the conviction that, if God is our creator, then God is knowable. God is knowable

because God *wants* to be known and, by becoming human in the person of Jesus, made himself knowable.

We have four major sources of knowing God: Scripture, the record of God's interactions with us throughout history; Reason, our ability to think and learn and discover; Tradition, how others on the journey of faith have known God; and Experience, what we learn about God from our own lives.

Throughout the summer, we're going to dive into each of those four sources of knowing God, and ask how we can know God better. We explored two kinds Experience. First, we looked at Spiritual Practices that help us know God. Spiritual practices are largely about our interior world, connecting our spirits to God's Spirit. Last week, we looked at service, the external movement of our faith by which we find God in those around us.

Today, we're going to face the real limits of personal experience. How do we know when we have a spiritual experience that we're experiencing God? How do we know when we hear God's voice, that it's really God and not just our own wishful thinking?

Personal Experience by itself can be pretty dangerous. We're masters of self-deception, and I can't tell you the number of times as a pastor, I've had someone tell me that they know for a fact God wants them to do something that's plainly a bad, wrong idea. But they've convinced themselves it's the right thing to do - because it's really what they *want* to do, and they've convinced themselves God says it's okay.

I've found that in my own life - that I've taken something to God in prayer and heard what I think is God's voice. But I wonder... is it really God? Or am I just hearing what I want to hear?

How do I know when my experience of God is trustworthy?

God's answer to this question is somewhat surprising: we know by experiencing God in community with other believers. I don't mean that we don't have our own personal experiences of God. Rather, that we bring those individual experiences together and share them with each other. You help me know what's of God and what's just my wishful thinking, and I help you discern what's God's voice in your life, too.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 14. This is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in the city of Corinth. Paul planted this church, and then left after a few months. He keeps in contact with the church via letters, and their most recent letter indicates the church is not doing well. They're divided, characterized by infighting. And so at this point in the letter, Paul has been addressing specifically how they come into worship together.

Paul's churches worshipped quite a bit differently from ours. Their worship was centered around a meal, called the Love Feast. During the meal, they would observe the Lord's Supper, the communion meal. And then people in the congregation would share. Some would speak in tongues, some would offer a

word of prophecy. Some would offer a teaching - what we might think of as a homily or short sermon. But it was all done without a lot of structure, as everyone was eating together.

And in Corinth, it had gotten pretty out of hand. People were shouting over each other, and using their various spiritual gifts to prove how much better they were than anyone else. It's worth reading chapters 11-14 all together sometime this week, so you can feel the weight of Paul's instruction. But I want to read with you this morning just the last bit, beginning in verse 26:

Well, my brothers and sisters, let's summarize. When you meet together, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what is said. But everything that is done must strengthen all of you.

No more than two or three should speak in tongues. They must speak one at a time, and someone must interpret what they say. But if no one is present who can interpret, they must be silent in your church meeting and speak in tongues to God privately.

Let two or three people prophesy, and let the others evaluate what is said. But if someone is prophesying and another person receives a revelation from the Lord, the one who is speaking must stop. In this way, all who prophesy will have a turn to speak, one after the other, so that everyone will learn and be encouraged. Remember that people who prophesy are in control of their spirit and can take turns. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the meetings of God's holy people. -- 1 Corinthians 14:26-33

Here's a group of Jesus followers who have let their personal experience of God get out of hand. Specifically, it's become about what's best for *them*, not for the whole community. Paul's correction is a not-so-gentle nudge to remember the purpose of God's gifts: to draw us into relationship with each other.

And in the middle of these instructions is a bit of wisdom that has captivated me for years:

Let two or three people prophesy, and let the others evaluate what is said.

Hearing from God is a tricky business. People want to make it clear cut and easy, but it's not in my experience... and it apparently wasn't for Paul's churches either. Paul says, "When someone hears from God, submit it to the community and let them *evaluate* it."

Right there, Paul acknowledges what I'm afraid of: that when I think I'm hearing from God, it's not always definitely God. That I might be wrong. That it's tricky.

Paul's solution is the Church. What do we do when it's tricky? We submit our experience of God to each other. We ask for help. We say, "Here's what I'm hearing. What do you think?"

This strikes us as strange, doesn't it? It challenges our individualism. Because what Paul is saying here is that we can't know God's will by ourselves. To know God fully *requires* us to be community with each other.

God created us to have a personal experience of God. To be in a personal relationship with God. But that relationship is only fully realized when we're in community with each other.

We're all limited. Like the blind men with the elephant, we all only know in part. You know God differently from how I know God. So we all come together and share our experiences and *that* is how God is present in our midst.

In that same section of 1 Corinthians is where Paul introduces his famous body metaphor - the Church is a body, comprised of many different parts. Some of us see, some of us smell, some of us hear, some of us feel. We all need to work together to be a whole, healthy, functioning body. We need each other. We were *created* for each other.

Here at Catalyst, this is one of the major reasons we have a preaching team. It's not actually good for you to hear only from me all the time. I have a perspective, and it's valuable, but it's limited. If you always, only get my perspective, you end up with a skewed, limited picture of God. So we bring a whole bunch of perspectives together: you hear from people younger than me, older than me. Men and women. Moms, dads, people who don't have kids. People who work in all kinds of fields outside professional ministry. Because that's how God designed us, and that's God's vision for worship.

It's why C-Groups are so important, too. In C-Group, we share with each other from our own perspectives. We're able to share what God is doing in our lives, ask for guidance and evaluation in a context that's full of love and free of judgment.

Knowing God is like any other relationship - it takes work and practice. Learning to distinguish God's still, small voice from our own takes some time and dedication. And it takes a community of believers around you who are helping you to figure out what God is saying to you, and how your unique gifts serve your spiritual family.

This isn't an accident. And God isn't just trying to be a jerk by making it hard to know if you're hearing God's voice.

God created us to be in community with each other. And it's in community that we hear God's voice most clearly. Think of it like a good ole fashioned pot luck: each of us has our signature dish we make. Personal formation and service are like perfecting that recipe. And our signature dish is delicious, wonderful, beautiful by itself.

But it can't compare to a full potluck, when *everyone* brings all their signature dishes together and we all feast together, enjoying the fruit of each other's constant faith and dedication.

If you're here, here's what I know about you: God has given you particular gifts and abilities. Your particular relationship with God is important for Catalyst. God invites you to be part of this community, and through your participation here, to know God more deeply and more fully.

Over the last few weeks, we've been exploring how we can experience a deep, personal knowledge of God. Today, then, we see that God intended this as an invitation to a deeper relationship not just with God, but with each other. Experience of God draws us closer into community with each other, too. And it's by living, working and sharing together we receive the fullest, best picture of God.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus gathered us around a table to know him.

1. Who has God put in my life as a wise, discerning voice?
2. When have I been tempted this week to pull away from those voices?
3. When this week can I share what God is doing in my life with those people?

Assignment + Blessing

What is God saying to you? How can you share that with your community?