

Bring it to Life

1 John 4:7-16

Kids ask the hardest theological questions.

One of the children at my church once caught me off guard with with a doozie a few years ago.

It was only about 3 minutes before the service was supposed to start and I was about to walk in to the sanctuary when she stopped me to ask.

“How do you know that God is real?”

It was a great question, and I am sure I didn't have a great answer in the moment. But, as children often do, she was forthrightly and succinctly asking something that many of us—if not all of us— have probably wondered at some point.

“How do you know that God is real?”

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One reason this is such a natural question is that a lot of the ways that we think about God are incredibly abstract. Invisible, everywhere, an all powerful being, who speaks although without making actual sounds, who moves, but is also everywhere. Whose presence maybe we can feel? But how can we be sure?

This is the great gift of Jesus. That in Jesus' incarnation, we have an encounter with God's real presence in the world. We get to see how God treats real people when God is standing face to face with them.

We get to see how God stands up to the powerful on behalf of the lowly.

We get to hear God's teaching and wisdom in words that we can understand.

Jesus shows us what God's love looks like in this world.

Which is great.

But that was also a long time ago by now. None of us were there. We have the beautiful stories transmitted across the generations. We have the mysterious sacraments baptism, and communion, by which we connect through our senses to the real presence of Christ in our midst.

All these things feed some of our desire to encounter God's presence in the world.

But I think if we are honest, they also still leave us wanting for something.

How do we really know, that God is real?

How do we really feel and encounter the presence of God in our real lives, right now?

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In the baptism liturgy this morning, Francesco got to say this great line that we say whenever we baptize someone: “the sacrament of baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God.”

Baptism is this wonderful opportunity that we have to make tangible something that is so abstract and intangible. To take welcome, and embrace, and God’s grace, and literally pour it over our heads.

An outward and visible sign, of the grace of God.

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How do we know that God is real?

Another answer comes from today’s reading.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves... knows God.... No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us”

Let us love one another. For in loving one another, we will know God. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us.

How do we know that God is real? Through love.

This is the enduring point of access given to us, to connect with the heart of who God is. The love that we are invited to—called to—share with one another. When we look upon one another with love, we are looking upon the Because if we take moments to look upon each other with love, then we will come to know God.

And lest you think that this is just another abstract answer to the question, the love we are talking about here is not just some warm feeling. It is the fruit of intention. It is something we build together.

Think of the most loving relationships in your life. It probably didn’t just happen. That love has most likely been the hard-won result of a lot of time spent together, sitting together facing some

of life's biggest challenges, working through arguments, forgiving each other, sharing deep and vulnerable parts of your self and your story.

While often the origins of love may feel mysterious and like they come upon us from out of the blue sky. Enduring love is the fruit of committed presence, deep sharing, and vulnerability.

That is also the kind of love that exposes us to God.

This —beloved— is the heart of our task. The core of our calling in this community. To bring God's love to life. And that is not an abstract task. We bring God's love to life, by loving. By doing the real, tangible, work of building a community of loving relationships.

Everything we do together in this place, whether it is sharing a meal, baptizing a child, making music together, giving food and fuel to neighbors in need, sitting beside a hospital bed, or yes even reviewing budgets and reports... all of it. Everything we do here, is pointed toward one goal.

It is to bring love to life. To take something that might otherwise feel hopelessly abstract and turn it into tangible acts of beauty, compassion, and love.

Just as in baptism we take these immensely mysterious claims about God's grace, mercy, and love, and we distill it down into a bowl of water. That we can touch.

This is what church is. It is the place where we take the immense mystery of God's grace, mercy, and love, and distill it down into casseroles, and songs, and conversations, and prayers.

And in a moment when the world is marked by chaos and violence. When fear and grief assail us from every screen. What is needed more, than faithful people, around the world, each in their own way, distilling the deepest truths we proclaim into ordinary acts of mercy and peace?

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Perhaps you have had this question before.

“How do we know that God is real?”

I think often we imagine that the answer to this question lies at the end of some deep philosophical inquiry, or at the heart of an inspiring sermon, or buried in the pages of some ancient sacred text.

We search our own hearts and we search the heavens for the presence of God. We wonder, and wrestle, in the loneliness of our own minds and the silence of our own hearts.

What scripture tells us today should be good news.

“Let us love one another. For in loving one another, we will know God. No one has ever seen God but if we love one another, God lives in us.”

Just look around. Love these people. And you will come to know God.

Religion is a team sport. It only works when we do it together. Our ability to be personally connected to God is sustained by participation in community. It is nurtured when we show up to worship together, when we sing together, and when we sit in circles to share the truth of our lives with one another.

That is how we will come to know — that God — is real.