

# Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, April 28, 2024  
"Seeking Knowledge and Understanding"

## *Young at Heart Message*

The Ethiopian official in our last reading today answered Philip's question by saying, "How can I understand unless someone helps me?"

How can we understand unless someone helps us?

In the context of our story, they are talking about understanding scripture.

But I think this question can apply to many aspects of life.

And, perhaps more importantly, how can we understand if we do not seek to understand in the first place?

I paired the reading in Acts with the reading in 1 John today because 1 John talks at length about loving each other.

"Love comes from God, and when we love each other, it shows we have been given new life."

Loving each other is much easier to do when we understand each other.

But, how can we understand each other unless someone helps us?

So, with that in mind, I'd like to do something different this morning and spend about 10 minutes engaging with each other to seek to understand our neighbours a bit better.

I would like this exercise to involve a bit of moving around. Try to engage with people you may not know as well, rather than those you know very well.

The question options you can ask each other are:

1) Who is one person who had a significant impact on who you are today, and why?

2) What is one thing that has warmed your heart this week, and why?

Let's take about 10 minutes, and try to visit with at least 2 different people.

Seek to understand with genuine curiosity. The question-asker should ask the question and then listen. Once the person sharing is done, switch.

I'll set a timer for 10 minutes. Here are the questions again:

1) Who is one person who had a significant impact on who you are today, and why?

2) What is one thing that has warmed your heart this week, and why?

### ***The Message***

Did anyone learn anything about the people you talked to? You don't have to share, just a show of hands.

Did this exercise feel difficult or uncomfortable?

The questions we asked each other had the potential to be deep or uncomfortable questions certainly, but they are still pretty surface-level questions.

I wonder what would happen if we sought to understand and love others, in all contexts, with genuine curiosity and joy?

This reading from Acts tells us a lot about the unnamed Ethiopian official, and about Philip.

Philip approaches this person not with arrogance or unsolicited advice.

Instead, he simply asks, do you understand what you are reading?

This opens the door for the Ethiopian official to respond however he feels most comfortable responding.

He could have said "oh yes, I understand everything perfectly, thank you for asking."

But instead, he seeks knowledge and understanding, and he admits that he could not possibly understand what he was reading without help.

And Philip then gently guides the Ethiopian official toward better understanding, without judgment or assumptions.

It is a moment where both people demonstrate the concept of loving each other deeply that is expressed in the 1 John passage.

Truly working to love others sounds easy and ideal in theory, but in practice, it is much harder.

We often encounter people that we do not understand, and we can be afraid to try to better understand them, either because we are afraid to ask, or because we are afraid of their answer.

I will give you an example that I think many people have a hard time understanding about others, but I also think that it is important to talk about.

Younger generations are, in general, finding these topics to be quite natural and not nearly as taboo as many of us who are older have found them to be.

So, seeking to understand things that we were never exposed to growing up is an important part of learning and growing *with* others, and seeking to love and understand people more deeply.

So, my example is this:

When I was in seminary, I met a person who identified as gender fluid and non-binary – neither male nor female, but the person presented to the world as mostly female-appearing.

So, in theory, I wanted to show interest and care in learning more about this person's world and perspective, but in practice, I really struggled initially to use the pronouns they/them to refer to this person.

And for me, it wasn't because I didn't want to try. I really did want to try to do better.

But, I had never met anyone who identified this way, so I had never had occasion to use pronouns other than he/she.

Luckily, this person was like Philip in our scripture reading today.

I was honest with them and I told them I had never met someone who used they/them pronouns, so it did not come naturally to me.

Essentially, I said "how can I understand unless someone helps me?"

And, graciously, they helped me to better understand, and they gave me opportunities to practice my fluency in using new pronouns.

And, I must tell you, I am so beyond grateful for this person, who, like Philip, was willing to help me understand.

I could have easily avoided them all together – I could have simply not engaged with them at all during my classes.

But I also recognized that in a changing world, my fear of feeling uncomfortable seeking to understand this person was not going to serve me well in a pastoral context.

Pastors interact with all kinds of people. We get the opportunity to seek to understand people in new and different ways.

I knew that if I did not sit in my own discomfort and seek to better understand eventually, and practice this radical love toward others, it would not be easy to learn outside of seminary.

And, I am so grateful for the opportunity I had, because I have since met *many* new people who identify as gender fluid and non-binary.

I've met adults my age who have explored their gender identity as adults, once they had vocabulary and support for the way they have always felt.

But, more recently, I have met a lot of kids – more than you might expect – who are exploring these questions at a much younger age. Questions that we never had the opportunity to even ask when we were growing up.

Had I not sought to understand when I did, I would still be uncomfortable with these conversations, and I would struggle to relate to any person – young or not – who has taken this journey of self-exploration of their gender.

So, the point in sharing this story is all to say that we may not always understand or agree with the way someone lives their life, but when we are called to love others, part of that call is to seek to better understand others.

We have opportunities every day – every time we interact with others – to seek to better understand them.

Just like Philip could have kept right on walking, or the Ethiopian leader could have declined help to understand, I could have ignored the opportunity I had to learn about someone who was different than me and different than anyone I had ever met.

But, the Ethiopian official would have missed his opportunity for baptism.

Philip would have missed an opportunity to do the work he was called to do with others.

I would have missed an opportunity to get to know an amazing human being, and to grow in my own journey toward loving and better understanding others.

Are we ever going to be perfect at loving others?

No, of course not. We all have our own biases to overcome.

But, if we can, at the very least, approach others with openness and a genuine curiosity to learn about them and understand their perspective, we may just learn something about ourselves in the process.

Once the desire to expand ourselves to know and accept other people is cultivated, all we really need to do is practice it and develop the tools and skills to become better at it.

But, if the desire isn't there, it is far less likely to happen.

The example I shared today is only one example, but there are so many other examples of people who don't meet our expectations, or who are different than we are.

So, may we open our hearts and minds and approach others with genuine curiosity that leads to love and deepening understanding.

As we walk our own paths to love and serve God and others, may we meet others where they are just as we hope they meet us where we are. Amen.

Let us pray:

God of wisdom and understanding, we ask that you help us to answer your call to love you and to love one another. You are indeed love, and as it says in 1 John, if we keep on loving others, we will stay one in our hearts with You, and You will stay one with us.

Continue to remind us, God, that loving you and loving others cannot be separated.

Help us to love others and seek to better understand others, even when it feels uncomfortable for us. Help us to grow and expand our minds and our hearts, lifting them to you as we open them to other people.

Lead us, guide us, and hear us when we ask, "How can we understand unless someone helps us?" Help us to better understand, God. Help us to love with all our hearts. Amen.