
"Jesus? I Know Him!"

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Atlanta, GA

Out of all of the movie stars in Hollywood, there is one that can make me laugh by not even saying a word--Will Ferrell.

So it's not a surprise that I love the movie, "Elf." Fast becoming a Christmastime classic, Elf is the story of an infant who crawls into Santa's toy bag and ends up at the North Pole where he is raised by Santa, Mrs. Clause, and the elves. As an adult, Buddy the Elf, played by Will Ferrell, finds out that he was born in New York City and Santa encourages him to find his birthfather. So, the great adventure begins.

While in New York, Buddy falls into the perfect job--working as an Elf at Gimbels department store. Thanksgiving has come and past, and the manager is gathering the employees together for the big announcement.

"Okay, people, tomorrow morning, 10 a.m., Santa's coming to town!"

And, in typical Will Ferrell fashion, he replies, "Santa's coming here?! I know him! I know him!"

Such enthusiasm and excitement and pride and joy.

Despite the fact that Buddy the Elf actually DOES know Santa, everyone else looks at him as if he's crazy. They laugh it off, imagining this employee to be just another over-the-top Christmas nut. And, he plays the part well, always dressed in full elf attire, including a funny green hat and, yes, bright yellow tights.

To the rest of the employees, Gimbels' Santa is just another hired hand to help out with this season's long line of screaming children and Christmas wishes. To them, this Santa has another real job--he is just doing this on the side for some extra cash. They know the type, a different Santa for every department store.

However, Buddy the Elf isn't talking about just another Santa. He is talking about the true Santa--the Santa that resides at the North Pole--the Santa that raised him--the Santa with the real beard, the authentic toy workshop. The Santa he had just left a few days ago.

Buddy the Elf actually KNOWS Santa.

Today's lesson from the Acts of the Apostles follows a similar storyline.

On second missionary journey, Paul arrives in Athens and is invited to Areopagus, the "town hall" meeting space, to speak on behalf of his god. Now, we must understand that this was not your typical meeting space--a gymnasium or conference center--this was the real deal. This was the location that held the supreme court; where all of the great philosophers would come together to debate in a city known for its academic prowess.

At that time, Athens was overrun with idols, so much so that they almost had as many gods as people. Whatever strange gods were recommended to them, they admitted them, and allowed them a temple and an altar. They were addicted to anything that was new and exciting; you know--the mentality of "anything goes."

So Paul begins his discourse by pointing out how religious they are! And, he's right. Yet, he then mentions that he had come across an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god."

So the Apostle Paul does his best Will Ferrell impression. "Are you talking about God? I KNOW him! I KNOW him! He is the one of created the heavens and the earth! The one that gives us life and blessed our ancestors. In him we "live and move and have our being!"

Now some historians believe this altar to an unknown god pinpointed their addiction to deifying anything that could be imagined; that they were just covering their bases.

Others see this inscription in a more positive light. Maybe the Athenians, the most learned and bright people of Greece, were humbly throwing their hands up in the air and saying, "God is such a grand mystery. Who can actually KNOW him?"

And this, my friends, is the question of the morning. Can we KNOW God?

Growing up in my home church in Birmingham, AL, this objective was above all others. In fact, our mission statement, slogan, if you will, was a paraphrase of John chapter 17, "To know God and make him known." It was on the stationary, printed in the bulletins, even etched on the wall of the narthex.

We were called to get to know Jesus so that we could tell others about him. How were we going to do this? You guessed it; Bible Study. We memorized Scripture verses, books of the Bible, parables of Jesus. You name it, we learned it. We were instructed to heartily pray and we would come to know God.

But, at several points throughout the journey, I wondered if this task was even possible. Is God knowable? I could attain knowledge about God. I could communicate with God, but could I KNOW God?

To know someone indicates a level of intimacy, both in the Biblical context and in everyday life. And, the God of the Old Testament seemed hard to reach on an intimate level.

Until the coming of Christ, God is only seen and communicated with indirectly--through a burning bush, in a pillar of cloud and smoke, a dream, a mysterious voice, a prophet, angel, messenger of God. And, even when God does take on a human form, he is unidentified, as in the wrestling match with Jacob or the three men that come to Abraham's tent.

In fact, God establishes boundaries in the relationship. Moses is a great example. When in God's presence, Moses is instructed to remove his sandals. He cannot enter the Holy of Holies, which housed the Ark of the Covenant. In fact, none of the Israelites were permitted to touch the Ark. And, then, Moses is called to lead the people to the edge of the Promised Land, yet unable to enter it. So we must ask, did even Moses, this great man of God, really KNOW God?

The great philosophers grappled with this topic, too. Plato believed that the soul was a fallen divinity, imprisoned in the body. Using the myth of the cave, he demonstrated that things of this world only echo, participate in, or imitate eternal forms.

In other words, we may be able to get a glimpse of the divine, yet only bouncing off the walls of the cave. Can we consider this KNOWing God?

Plato and Socrates both believed that BEAUTY, or what we would call "God," is within us at our purest and most inner depths. So, as we gain knowledge and insight, we are actually Recollecting information that we had always known but had forgotten.

Maybe they are right. Maybe at our core, in our souls, in the depths of our hearts, we do actually KNOW God. Maybe we caught a glimpse of God this weekend at a street corner. Maybe that unexpected moment of joy was the Holy Spirit. Maybe the bread and the wine will become the body and blood of Christ in a few minutes. Maybe even at a moment of weakness, or grief, or uncertainty, God somehow lets us know that we are loved.

Maybe we are always getting to know God, like we continue to get to know one another; intimacy in process. Knowing God doesn't have to be a question of totality. Just like we will never entirely know each other.

There are moments with my wife, Hillary, when I feel as if I know her so well I can complete her sentences. And there are other moments when I wonder who is this person that I married?

At those moments, I have to trust that I have known her, I do know her, and I will continue to get to know her. Intimacy is an ongoing process. Same goes in our relationship with God.

This Easter season, we are getting to KNOW Christ all over again. We joined Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb where we saw a ray of hope in the midst of death. We have demanded to see proof, like Thomas. We walked the road to Emmaus with Cleopas and the other disciple to finally see Christ in the breaking of the bread. We are given comfort this morning when Jesus tells us that he will always be with us. And in a couple of weeks, we will receive the promised Holy Spirit as we recollect the God at the depths of our souls.

So, may we trust the ongoing intimacy between Creator and creation.

May we join the enthusiastic voices of St. Paul--and Will Ferrell--this morning as we proclaim, "Jesus? I KNOW him! I KNOW him!"

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!