

In 2019, something unexpectedly wonderful was created and shared with the world. Little did anyone know how invaluable this gift would become during the tumultuous early days of COVID-19. This treasure brought a sense of positivity, connection, laughter, and joy when the world felt increasingly isolated and uncertain. It was a beacon of hope, a witness to one person’s unique and steadfast faith in God, and a source of comfort that, in my opinion, surpassed most devotionals available. It was so good, in fact, that it made you want to burst into song.

What I’m describing is the podcast *Dolly Parton’s America*. Yes, *that* Dolly Parton.

The podcast’s full title is *Dolly Parton’s America: A Story of a Legend at the Crossroads of America’s Culture Wars*. It explores Dolly’s life, career, history, and legacy, seeking to answer the question: Why does Dolly Parton transcend political, cultural, and social divides in an era of such polarization? The creators describe it with these words: “In this intensely divided moment, one of the few things everyone still seems to agree on is Dolly Parton—but why?”

Over the course of nine episodes, the podcast delves into Dolly’s life, examining her unparalleled ability to inspire and connect with people from all walks of life. From feminists to conservatives, country music aficionados to social justice advocates, Dolly has become a rare unifying figure in a divided world. She’s even earned the unofficial moniker of “St. Dolly.”

As the podcast delves into Dolly’s spiritual journey, it offers a profound glimpse into her faith. Raised in a ‘fanatical, holy-roller Pentecostal’ tradition, Dolly candidly recounts her early experiences of fear and confusion surrounding salvation. Yet even amid the fire-and-brimstone preaching, her longing for God’s presence ignited a deeply personal relationship with the divine.”

At age 12, Dolly began spending time in an abandoned church near her family’s home in rural Tennessee. It became her sanctuary—a place where she sang, prayed, and simply sought to encounter God. One day, after hours of prayer, particularly meditating on Psalm 23, something changed. Dolly describes that moment:

“I remember it just came to me—I didn’t hear it like a voice; it came to me as a feeling that was as strong as a voice. I had a feeling I found God that day.”

When I hear Dolly’s story, I’m reminded of the times in my own life when I’ve cried out for God’s presence. Whether seeking answers, comfort, relief, or expressing gratitude, I’ll admit there have been moments when it felt like God was present but silent. And yet, there are also moments—rare and unforgettable—when God’s presence is undeniable, when it feels like a “voice” even if no words are spoken.

Dolly's description resonates deeply: "a feeling that was as strong as a voice." Such moments are transformative because they leave us changed. In those sacred encounters, we're given the gift of knowing who God is and recognizing where God is in our lives.

"Dolly's encounter with God mirrors the kind of revelation described in Ephesians 1:15–23. Here, the writer prays for a spirit of wisdom and revelation, inviting the faithful to know God more fully. This knowledge, not acquired through human effort but gifted by God, transforms lives. Dolly's experience illustrates this truth—a moment of divine connection reshaped her understanding of both God and herself."

It's through this gift that we come to grasp the depth of God's love, the hope we have in Christ, and the immeasurable greatness of God's power at work within us.

John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a similar theme, posing the question: How do we know God? The 1541 edition of the *Institutes* opens with these words:

"The whole sum of our wisdom, which is worth calling true and certain, is practically comprised of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. Of these, the first ought to show us not only that there is one God whom we must worship and honor...but also to acknowledge with praise and thanksgiving that all good things come from Him."

When we seek to know God, the magnificence of God becomes evident. And when we recognize God's goodness, our natural response is one of praise and gratitude. The more we look for God in our lives and in the world, the more we catch glimpses of God's grandeur and grace. And yet, the more we see, the more we understand how much remains beyond our comprehension. We are left in awe of the God whose love and power exceed anything we could imagine.

Calvin also addresses the second part of knowledge: knowing ourselves. He writes:

"The second part [knowledge of self], by showing us our weakness, wretchedness, futility, and greed, leads us to feel cast down about ourselves and to seek for God, since in Him lies all the good of which we are empty and naked."

Here, Calvin paints a stark picture of humanity's brokenness. He suggests that recognizing our own inadequacies drives us to seek God. While his words are theologically sound, they lack the grace and hope I think we need to hold onto. Rather than labeling humanity as "wretched," I'd argue we are broken people in a

broken world. Our brokenness isn't our identity; it's a condition that points us toward the wholeness only God can provide.

This is precisely what led Dolly to seek God. Despite her church's focus on fear and condemnation, Dolly longed for peace, assurance, and a tangible sense of God's presence. And God met her in that longing.

Dolly reflects on her experience that day in the abandoned church with these words:

“I found real truth in that one place. I found God. I found Dolly Parton. And I loved them both.”

Dolly's insight refines Calvin's argument. In that moment of divine revelation, she saw herself as God sees each of us: beloved and good. She was gifted the knowledge that the story does not end with our sinfulness and distance from good. She was taken to the end and to the beginning, when the cross has redeemed us and we live in paradise with God. She saw the truth that God calls us very good. That God loves us and that she/we could love herself because God first loved her.

Calvin's view of humanity as inherently sinful is accurate but incomplete. While sin marks our condition, it does not define our destiny. Through Christ's death and resurrection, we are redeemed. The empty cross reminds us that we are not shackled to sin but set free to live as God's beloved children. This is the truth revealed when God gifts us the spirit of wisdom and revelation. We come to know God, find ourselves, and love them both.

While Calvin's framework of divine knowledge as a humbling and awe-inspiring gift is profound, Dolly's story offers a tender complement. Her encounter with God demonstrates not only our human need but also the transformative joy of seeing ourselves as beloved creations of a gracious God."

While First Presbyterian is far from a small mountain church in Tennessee, but like Dolly's church where she found God and self, First Presbyterian is where the spirit of wisdom and revelation was given to me. It has been a place of profound encounters with God for me, just as that abandoned church was for Dolly. This sanctuary, with its ship-like ceiling and shimmering silver chandeliers, is where God has sought me out with a feeling as powerful as a voice, and I saw the face of God in you.

It was here, among you, that my faith deepened, expanded, and matured. Together, we have sought to know God's love and share that love with our neighbors. Your faith, wisdom, and kindness have shaped my understanding of ministry and strengthened my conviction in the necessity of the church today.

As I reflect on my time as your Associate Pastor for Christian Formation, I can't help but marvel at how you've taught me who God is and who I can be. The spirit of wisdom and revelation has shown up in your love for this

church and our work her. I am profoundly grateful for the ways this community has shown me God’s love and inspired me to live my faith more fully.

As head of Formation and Education, I can’t just leave you with what I have learned. While I think adding Dolly Parton to the cannon of reformed theologians will stay with you, I share this final thought. After Dolly encountered God that day, her response was, to sing with a “strength and conviction that only God could have understood. The Joy of the truth I found there is with me today.” When asked how she practices her faith she retorted, “I don’t practice; I live it.”

Through this congregation, God has given me knowledge of God and self, and in that I have the joy of the truth that it is very good. I will carry that joy with me as I live my faith and follow God’s call. So friends, I give you this knowledge, something you may already know to be truth, that at First Presbyterian you will come to know the Joy of the Love of God, the joy of the Good News of Jesus Christ, and joy of belonging to the divine community of the Holy Spirit. Friends, we are given the gift of First Presbyterian Church and that gift, to know God through this congregation, is very good.

To god be the glory Amen.