

“Known”

John 1:43-51; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

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I had a seminary professor who liked to say that when a word showed up multiple times in a scripture passage, we'd best pay attention. In the twenty four verses of Psalm 139, of which we just heard a portion, the word, “know” appears seven times, in various forms.

That same professor said that when something happens seven times in scripture, that we'd best pay extra attention. In Hebrew tradition, seven is a number of power, of completion, and is highly symbolic of God's presence.

So Psalm 139 speaks of knowing seven times. For those of us who like to rely on the cognitive part of our beings, that sounds like very good news.

But before we get too comfortable with that thought, we should note that the knowledge being referred to in this psalm isn't book learning. This is knowledge of a different sort, what psychologists today might call Emotional Intelligence. It is knowledge in its relational, not cognitive, sense.

And that's an important distinction to make. We Presbyterians, as a type, tend to value knowledge. We appreciate the work that our brains can do in absorbing information, making assessments and decisions, evaluating things. And that is a good thing. But sometimes that focus on the brain's work leads us to undervalue or even ignore the work of the heart.

Psalm 139 is here to remind us that knowledge is not simply the realm of the brain.

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me...” The knowledge of which the psalmist speaks is not measurable, statistical knowledge. It doesn't refer to how many bones are in my body, the color of my eyes, or the number of hairs on my head.

Yes, God knows those things, but to be searched and known by God is so much more.

Here the Psalmist is talking about deep, knowledge- the knowledge not just of our inward parts, but of our actions, our paths, and our words. It is an acknowledgement that there is not a thing about ourselves or our lives that is unknown to God.

N.T. Wright, an Anglican Bishop and professor at the University of St. Andrews, wrote compellingly about a time in his thirties when he experienced a deep depression, and, in his words, “one of the wise counselors who came to my rescue and helped me to work through old memories and sorrows drew me to Psalm 139. God was involved, says the psalm, from the very beginning of our mysterious conception, and he knows through and through all

that has gone into making us the people we are.”¹ The awareness that he was fully known, even in the depths of depression, by the God of creation, brought him deep comfort.

It is comforting, to be sure. It is also terrifying.

The idea that someone, even if that someone is God- perhaps especially if that someone is God- can know our every thought, every fear, every weakness, every doubt, every misgiving, every sin, can be overwhelming.

We want the world to see us at our best, and we devise elaborate strategies to try and make that happen. We plaster smiles on our faces when we feel anything but happy. We pursue careers we don't care about because we believe they will make us appear to be successful. We associate with people we can't respect because we think they will make our lives seem worthwhile.

We act as if everything is okay when inside we fear that we are falling apart. We tap dance around our problems, hoping that if we don't acknowledge them and no one else sees them, then they might cease being real.

And then we read Psalm 139. “O Lord you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. . . and are acquainted with all my ways.”

Not some of my ways. Not my good ways. Not the ways I want you to be acquainted with. All my ways. My selfish ways. My fearful ways. My angry ways. My spiteful ways. My stubborn ways. My jealous ways. My weak ways. It reminds us that there is nothing that we do that is separate from God's knowledge of us.

Terrifying.

Or it would be if this were the whole of our scripture.

If all we knew about God was that God knew and monitored our every move, we would have reason to be terrified. If scripture presented God to us as little more than a “Big Brother” character whose primary function was surveillance, then we'd be in trouble.

Thankfully, that is not the case. For elsewhere in scripture, we read words like:

- God created humankind in his image . . . blessed them, and indeed it was very good (Gen. 1)
- When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you (Isaiah 43)
- For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3).

¹ N.T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms*, p. 180.

- Nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8)

Time and time again, scripture tells us that God's intimate knowledge of us is not a matter of power or control – it is not knowledge for the sake of shaming or punishing or isolating. It is the knowledge Jesus showed Nathanael when first they met- accepting and not threatening. It is the knowledge of a creator for creation, and it is grounded in, and directed toward love.

Knowing this ought to make us embrace, and not fear, being known. It ought to free us to accept who we are as creatures of a loving God, and to accept others as the same.

If God, who created us and is acquainted with all our ways, loves us, then who are we to say that anything about us is shameful or unworthy of love?

One of the great gifts of my life is a group of women that I have known since college. For the past 25 years, we have, for all intents and purposes, grown up together. Collectively, we have experienced some of life's highest highs and lowest lows- jobs found and lost, marriage and divorce, infertility and parenthood, addictions and depression, deaths of friends, partners, parents and children.

We have seen each other at our very best, and at our very worst. In a recent conversation, one of these women expressed her worry that if she said something she might embarrass herself. My immediate response was that it is impossible for any of us to embarrass ourselves with one another- we are way past that point.

We are the kind of friends who are connected at a gut level, and accept each other for who we are, flaws and all. Though we don't talk every day now, and I'm not acquainted with all the details of their day to day lives, I can't always remember who is a vegetarian or who stopped drinking coffee, I know these women, and they know me. This knowledge fills me with great joy, and makes me realize, yet again, that despite the risks, there is great freedom in being truly, deeply known.

Next Sunday night, we will kick off a new program here at the church whose primary purpose is to create some space for us to begin to know one another better as a community of faith. *Embracing the Journey* is a dinner featuring two local therapists and our very own Pen Peery talking about some of the pressures and struggles all of us face, with a particular emphasis on mental health and addictions.

It is an acknowledgement that we are all broken, that no individual, and no family, is immune from the challenges of life, and that church is a safe, and important, place for us to bring these concerns. It provides an important opportunity for us to begin a conversation on the role our faith, and this church, can play in the very real, very painful struggles that too many of us try to keep hidden.

Too often, because of pride or fear or poor information, we do not bring our true selves to church. For too many of us, Sunday morning is a time to dress up and put on what we think

of as our “best selves,” and not a time to acknowledge our pain. We fear being found out- fear that if others knew the truth about our lives, about our families, about our relationships, then they would judge us or reject us.

We convince ourselves that the church is a gathering of saints- a collection of seemingly perfect people with their so-called perfect lives, and we worry that our brokenness will somehow preclude our membership.

The reality is something quite different. As has been said many times before, the church is not, in fact, a clubroom for the saints. It is a hospital- or perhaps a support group- for sinners, for the broken and wounded, the imperfect and the real. So then, there should be no place more appropriate for acknowledging our pain and struggle, than church.

To this place, we ought to be able to bring our depression and our addictions, our broken relationships and our grief, our infertility and job insecurity, our body image issues and our anger.

A friend recently shared with me a powerful quote about community. It was written by Heather Kopp, in her book *Sober Mercies: How Love Caught up with a Christian Drunk*. In her journey to recovery, Kopp noticed something about the twelve step meetings she was attending.

The connections she felt with a roomful of relative strangers was so strong, and the love and support experienced in these meetings was “[un]like anything [she’d] ever experienced, inside or outside of church.” She wondered why that was the case, asking, “how could a bunch of addicts and alcoholics succeed at creating the kind of intimate fellowship so many of my Christian groups had tried to achieve and failed?”

Over time she came to understand that “people bond more deeply over shared brokenness than they do over shared beliefs.”

Wow. “People bond more deeply over shared brokenness than they do over shared beliefs.”

Think about your own relationships- the strong ones, the real ones. How much of your connection with those people was shaped through some sort of challenge? Though fun and joy are integral parts of any relationship, ultimately they aren’t what really bind us together.

And it isn’t our similarities that connect us on a deep level with others. It’s the reality of who we are that does that. The more we can be real, making ourselves vulnerable, being honest about where we are, the more connected we will be, with ourselves, our God, and one another.

Few people articulate what I am trying to say better than the writer Anne Lamott. In a recent post on Salon.com, she made a short confession that was eye-opening to me. She

wrote, "I realize I'd been comparing my insides to other people's outsides. And people's insides are the same amount of screwed-up-ness"²

The sooner all of us realize that, the better. The sooner we stop trying to convince the world that our outsides are our whole story, and stop trying to convince ourselves that other people's outsides are more valuable than our insides, the better off we are all going to be.

The sooner we can accept God's love for us- for all of us- the sooner we can get down to the business of spreading that love around as God intended for us to do.

"I am fearfully and wonderfully made." You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are not perfect. You were not meant to be. But you are known, and you are loved, and that is enough.

Thanks be to God.

² Anne Lamott, *Trust Me on This*, www.salon.com, 12/12/14