

## Getting to Know You

Psalm 139

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Relationships are tricky these days, I think. Well, probably relationships have always been tricky. We just have to read the Bible or a Shakespeare play or anything by Jane Austen to see that there have always been complications, but I think there are *new* complications in relationships with cell phone, the internet, email, text messaging, and social networking. Just this week I was lamenting with a colleague how challenging it is in a new appointment – a new city – to form real, solid friendships outside the congregation (not that you all aren't really great, but you know, sometimes you need friends that you don't work with...). But in the same week, someone pointed out to me that I have about 1200 Facebook friends. That's a pretty dramatic contrast: 1200 friends on one hand, and challenged to make 1 friend on the other.

"But do you really *know* all those people on Facebook?" you might ask. Well, yes. I may not be best friends with all of them obviously, but I know them, or at least *have known* them. I don't accept friend requests from perfect strangers. These 1200 people are my classmates, colleagues, camp cabinmates, and family from the last 30 years. But let's take it a little deeper and ask, what is it to be known? Not just to be acquainted with someone, but to really be *known*, and to have someone know us – not the "us" we put on when we go to the office or out to a party, not the "us" we create to impress others; but the "us" when we're drooling on the pillow and stealing the covers at night, the "us" when we cry at those Hallmark channel movies, the "us" when we're selfish and judgmental and lazy. All of "us."

Of course, a Biblical scholar, when faced with that question of "What is it to be known" might snicker a little (if scholars are allowed to snicker). Because in the Bible, the word translated as "know" is sometimes a euphemism: for example, in Genesis, Adam *knew* Eve and she conceived and bore a son. Right. And that's not *exactly* what we're going for talking about relationships and being known here – but if we can get past the snickering, it's not all that far off. Because what we *are* talking about is intimacy. I think of the more modern option for marriage vows in the United Methodist Book of Worship which invites couples to covenant that they will "share all things" with each other. This includes their bodies, but also much more. Sharing all things means no secrets and no selfishness. An Orthodox theologian named Nellas takes it a step further, claiming that in marriage, the two don't just become one because individuals become a couple – but they are united as one member of the body of Christ. Two members of the body of Christ become one member of the body of Christ. It's a theological event, which is why we get married in the church.

But I'm guessing you didn't come this morning to hear a sermon about marriage – and especially not an Orthodox theologian's views on marriage. You came to hear about God. And discipleship. "And what the heck," you may think, "there's no gospel reading for the second week in a row? What are we supposed to do with this Psalm?"

Well, to be frank, you're supposed to pray with it. That's what the psalms are: songs to be sung, prayers to be prayed. They were sung and prayed by people of God for years and years and years until they were the music you sing and the words you recite without even realizing it, the things that settle so deep in your soul that before you know it, they've changed you. That's what you do with the psalm. You let it settle in your soul. You pray it.

But as we discussed in our practice group on Bible Study on Wednesday night, it helps to study the scripture before meditating on it: it helps to know – at least cognitively – what you’re getting into. And that brings us back to the beginning: what does it mean to be known by God, for God to have searched us and to know us?

Depending on how we’ve been taught – or how our consciences work – we may read this psalm with a bit of fear or intimidation. The idea that God knows everything about us – that there is nowhere we can escape from God’s presence – may feel a little claustrophobic. And then, there may be parts of our lives that we’d just prefer God not be a part of – little sections of our lives or brains or hearts that we’d like for God to just stay out of. No need for judgment, no need for guilt. And the Hebrew word that’s translated “searched” here is more physical than we imagine: it could be translated, “you have *examined* me and you know me.” It leaves me with the picture of sitting on the cold, uncomfortable doctor’s table in nothing but my socks and a paper gown, waiting, shivering, for the doctor to come in and notice my scars, my blemishes, my poor eating habits, my lack of exercise – with my safe, beautiful façade neatly folded on the chair in the corner, close by but too far away to provide any level of safety, security, or, dare we say, personal space.

There’s an element of judgment that we might shy away from in this psalm: “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know everything about me. There’s nowhere I can go that you won’t be there. You have known me since before I knew myself. You know me better than I know myself, or better than I admit. I can’t get away from you, even if I try.”

But there’s a grace in the knowing, too. The God who flung the stars into space, the God who created camels and flamingos and mountains and waterfalls, the God who our human minds will never fully be able to comprehend – that same God knows us, really *knows* us. Because that God created each of us by hand. The God we sang about at the start of the service: “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation” is also the God of verse 4 of that hymn, which is less familiar: “Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish they life and restore thee, fitting thee well for the tasks that are ever before thee. Then to thy need God as a mother doth speed, spreading the wings of grace o’er thee.” The God of all creation is as close as a whisper, and cares enough to know the thoughts of our hearts.

This image of God as a mother, knitting us together in the womb, weaving together our limbs – makes me think of my own mother (who might be surprised to hear how much I’ve talked about her next time she comes to visit, so play it cool, okay?). Anyway, my mom used to pick me up from elementary school in the afternoons, but every other Monday I stayed late for Girl Scouts, and my dad would pick me up on his way home from work. And almost every time my dad picked me up, he took me to Baskin Robbins for some ice cream. Of course, my mom was at home cooking dinner and here I was eating a cup of chocolate (always plain chocolate) ice cream at 5:30 in the afternoon. Every time my dad would say, “Don’t tell your mom, now...” and every single time we would walk in the door at home and barely put our bags down before my mom would say, “Did you eat ice cream?” “Did you tell her?” my dad would ask, feigning frustration. “How did you know?” I would ask, astonished. And my mom said, every time, “Mothers just know.” Mothers just know. I was astounded that she could know so much about me, that she could know me better than I knew myself, that she could know my goings out and my comings in, even when I was far away.

Of course, I learned later that the way she knew had less to do with her “knowing” as a mother and more to do with the chocolate ice cream that was still on my face. But still there was

something beautiful, something so comforting, about being known. Isn't that we're looking for, anyway? Someone to know us completely? Is not our desire to trust another entirely, to experience that joy of intimacy?

Like a mother, God searches us out. God seeks us wherever we go. Nothing is off limits for God. God is with us, even if that makes us feel a little claustrophobic or afraid or requires more of us than we'd like to give. We are fearfully and wonderfully made by the creator of the universe, and that creator continues to seek us out every day. Whether we doubt, whether we run, whether we do not believe, God is still there, actively involved in our formation, our daily re-formation, hopefully our reformation, and always our redemption.

This psalm is one that bears repeating. It's a prayer to be prayed. It's something to write on your heart, whether today you feel encouraged by it or a little bit smothered by it. It's one to memorize. It will beckon to you like an old friend. On the long passage through the wilderness or life, it can be a place of refuge and renewal, an oasis. God knows us.

And as we seek to know God, to be known by God, the call of the psalm is to pray it as a prayer: the last verses, which aren't in the lectionary selection, say, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." The call of discipleship is to pray the prayer not just as a declaration of God's power and knowledge, nor even as permission for God to know us; but as an invitation: "God, come and search me. Know my heart. Go with me wherever I go. See if there is anything in me that isn't you and take it out. Bring your judgment, O God, when necessary. And always bring your grace." May this be our prayer. Amen.