1-13/14-18 Rev. Amy Haines

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

Who knows you best of all? Is it your best friend, or a sibling? Is it a spouse or a parent?

How long have they known you well?

What do they know about you? What dreams do you share with them? What fears do you keep from them? How is your life better because you are known by them?

Think of the many different relationships you have had with others over the years. How much of yourself did you share with others? How much of yourself did you guard from others?

In high school I can remember sometimes wondering if some of my friends would still be my friends if they really knew me—my fears and my faith, my dreams and my struggles, what I loved and what I hated.

As a college freshman I can remember pondering how much of myself to share with my new friends. What would bond us? What would drive them away?

Now I live life in the fishbowl of the pastorate. While I have learned to be transparent with my congregations concerning the joys, struggles and adventures of my family, there still will be moments when I don’t share everything I think and believe.

In truth, I don’t believe any of us are fully known, 100% fully known, by anyone around us,

even those who know us best. The only one who knows us that well is God Almighty.

As Psalm 139 proclaims:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I stand up.

Even from far away, you comprehend my plans.

You study my traveling and resting.

You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways. (1-3)

Some of you grew up in a small town, or can still remember when Springboro was a village,

when you knew all your neighbors and could explain how much of the town was related to one another.

Back then you were familiar with the ways of your neighbors, which was a good thing if you watched out for one another, and a bad thing if your ways led to trouble. Then everyone knew your trouble before the sun had set.

There is the story of a small-town prosecuting attorney who called his first witness to the stand in a trial — a grandmotherly, elderly woman. He approached her and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?”

She responded, “Why, yes, I do know you, Mr. Williams. I’ve known you since you were a young boy. And frankly, you’ve been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat on your wife, you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you’re a rising big shot when you haven’t the brains to realize you never will amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes, I know you.”

The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what else to do he pointed across the room and asked,

“Mrs. Williams, do you know the defense attorney?”

She again replied, “Why, yes I do. I’ve known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, too. I used to baby-sit him for his parents. And he, too, has been a real disappointment to me. He’s lazy, bigoted, he has a drinking problem. The man can’t build a normal relationship with anyone

and his law practice is one of the shoddiest in the entire state. Yes, I know him.”

At this point, the judge rapped the courtroom to silence and called both counselors to the bench. In a very quiet voice, he said with menace, “If either of you asks her if she knows me, you’ll be jailed for contempt!”

-- Homileticsonline.com 1-15-06 “SoulLift”

We are created to live in relationship—with God, with one another, and with all of creation.

We are created to live in relationship—to know and be known, to love and be loved.

Yet we live in a world where real, deep, vulnerable relationships are hard to find, sometimes even within our own families, let alone with friends, neighbors, coworkers, brothers and sisters in the body of Christ the church. We may know about one another, yet we do not know one another. We may know one another’s families and work history and favorite football team,

yet not know one another’s hopes and dreams, struggles and sins, fears and faith.

If you are now known in a real, deep, vulnerable relationship where there is grace and mercy,

love and forgiveness, support and strength, treasure that relationship, as they are hard to find.

We live in the age of social media, when we may be connected with many friends on Facebook,

knowing a lot about one another without knowing one another well. We may like one another’s pictures of pets and children without ever having met them. We may think we know one another’s political views or favorite missions, yet then realize there is so much more to another’s beliefs than what is posted on social media. I admit I post less pictures now than I used to, and I rarely respond to controversial posts, for I don’t want to get into an argument with someone I barely know.

I am scared how well technology thinks it knows me, however, as it mines my online data.

Sometimes Facebook’s ads pertain to my life, and sometimes they don’t. Stats, preferences, opinion polls, shopping history—all of those only give a glimpse into my life.

Have you ever been annoyed, like I was at Christmas, when you view or purchase something online, then ads for similar products show up everywhere for the next month? At Christmas I had to watch when Rachel was around my computer, for Pandora radio kept popping up an ad for Kohls which showed one of her gifts!

I am also scared at how well hackers nowadays can know just enough about me to create a new me, at least online, in such a way that could wreak havoc with my real life and credit score.

I am not scared, however, when I think that the God of the universe knows me. OK, maybe I am a little. More often I am humbly amazed that God knows me. And God knows you. And God still loves us all, no matter where our journeys of life and of faith have taken us.

In Psalm 139, our Psalmist reminds us that God knows every bone and muscle formed in our body. The Psalmist also reminds us that God knows our every thought, word, and action. God knows our words of care and compassion as well as our words of anger and revenge. God knows our thoughts of hopes and dreams as well as our thoughts of indifference and selfishness. God knows our actions whether we are in the sky or on the ground, in the dark or in the light. God knows us intimately, and loves us anyway.

We matter to God. What a wonderful affirmation!

God loves us from creation, to conception, to the moment of our borning cry. God’s love continues from our birth through our growing years when we learn to walk and talk and think.

God’s love is there with us when we face the daily joys and struggles of childhood, teen years,

and adulthood.

God’s love continues throughout all of our life whether or not we are ready to accept that love.

God loves us even when we seek to run as far as we can away from God. And God’s love continues to call out to us throughout all our life, yearning for our love in return.

God loves us when we grow, when we marry, when we age. And God loves us at our death,

ready to embrace us if we have said yes to Jesus, ready to lead us from this world to the next.

If we have not said yes to Jesus by the time of our death, I believe God still loves us, but weeps out of love, weeping over our choice of hell over heaven.

God loves us and claims us and knows us. No matter who we are. No matter where we were born, or where we now live. No matter our country or state or town or side of the tracks. No matter if we live a life of ease, or if we may struggle to have enough to live through another day. No matter what we may hear on the news, or what we may hear from the people around us. No matter what we have done in our past, or what we are doing now. God loves us and claims us and knows us.

The prophet Isaiah recorded God as saying:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine. (Is 43)

The prophet Jeremiah proclaims:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,

plans for your welfare and not for harm,

to give you a future with hope. (Jer 29)

The Psalmist proclaimed:

You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways.

You knit me together in my mother’s womb.

I praise you, O God, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,

when none of them as yet existed.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is so high that I cannot fathom it. (Psalm 139)

At Jesus’ baptism he heard the voice of God proclaim:

“You are my Beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”

That same voice of God seeks to speak to us this day here in worship and then every day,

and we are called to listen for God’s voice say to us:

.."You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love.

I have molded you together in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you in your mother's womb. I've written your name in the palm of my hand and I hold you safe in the shade of my embrace. I hold you. You belong to Me and I belong to you. You are safe where I am. Don't be afraid. Trust that you are the beloved. That is who you truly are."

-- Henri Nouwen csec.org 5-17-91 “The Life of the Beloved”

What incredible good news—that the God of the universe loves us so intimately!

Our God is not some unknown, abstract deity but a personal, intimate Creator who knows us each by name. God knows our struggles and our fears and our faith. God sent Jesus to show us God’s love lived out in this world. And when Jesus returned to heaven, through the power of the Holy Spirit he reminded us that God is still with us always.

This is the same God who is concerned for one sheep, one missing coin, one prodigal son. No one is written off by God as a hopeless cause. No one is lost in the crowd when God knows them.

This is the same God who called Abraham and Sarah, and forgave David and the woman at the well. No one is a sinner beyond redeeming.

This is the same God who through Jesus called to Nathanael, and said “follow me.”

And Nathanael responded by asking Jesus, “how do you know me?”

Jesus simply replied, “I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip called you.”

Nathanael was amazed, that Jesus would see him. Earlier, when Philip first told Nathanael about Jesus, he was skeptical, writing off Jesus simply because of where he came from. How often do we do that, judging another because of where they are from or the color of their skin

or the style of their clothing?

Nathanael had sneered, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Growing up I heard “Can anything good come out of Franklin?”

Buckeye fans may sneer, “Can anything good come out of that state up north?”

Politically this weekend we heard, “Can anything good come out of Haiti?”

Nathanael was from Cana, and looked down upon Nazareth as a rural, nondescript village

that had no power, no people, no possibilities. So Nathanael rejected Jesus without knowing him, simply because of where he was from.

Yet Jesus looked beyond such rejection. He did not argue with Nathanael or seek to change his mind then and there. Instead, Jesus calmly said to Nathanael, “Follow me.”

Follow me, and see if anything good can come out of Nazareth.

Follow me, and you will see the power of God in ways beyond your imagination.

Follow me, and you will see glimpses of heaven here on earth.

Nathanael was amazed, and humbled, that Jesus saw him, looking past his fears and failings,

looking past his yearnings and attitudes. To Jesus’ invitation to follow, Nathanael responded with a confession of faith, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (v49)

His cry echoes John the Baptist. His cry echoes the Psalmist. His cry echoes our faith cries today.

It is reassuring as well as frightening to be known by God. To be truly seen by Jesus. Then loved. Then forgiven. Then claimed. Then called.

To think that God knows us is both frightening and reassuring. The God who knows our name also knows our fears and failures.The God who knows our name also knows our potential and strengths.

Maxine Clarke Beach once wrote,

“We all yearn for God to know our name and to call us by that name, yet we stand in awe of the frightening possibilities that might flow from such intimacy.”

--Upper Room Disciplines 2004, p. 18

We may reject God, yet God will continue to persist in loving us. We cannot hide our sins from God, although we may fool the people we love around us.

God knows every move, every thought, every breath we take. There are times that I do not want to admit my sin even to myself, let alone to God. I feel like a failure, or I am ashamed that I have let God down. What a relief it is to me to realize that God already knows my sins and fears, and simply waits for me to acknowledge them and ask for forgiveness.

What a relief to realize that even though God knows me intimately, God still loves me and calls me into his service.

What a relief to know that God knows us, and as Roman 8 proclaims:

“Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,

nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,

nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,

will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (8.38b-39)

Friends, this is good news, that God knows us—and loves us anyway! This is good news, that Jesus is God’s invitation for us to know God.

You are created to know and be known. You are created to love and be loved. Not only by God, but also by one another.

God says to us what God said to Jesus, “You are my beloved.”

Jesus says to us what he said to Nathanael long ago, “Follow me.”

May we continue to listen for God’s call, and continue to follow where God leads, and continue to treasure how we know and are known by God.