

# To know and be known...

*Psalm 139:1-18 and John 1:43-49*

CWZepp, BWCOB, January 18, 2015

A few years ago, Amanda and I were leaving a restaurant after having dinner at Annual Conference. As the host, who had also welcomed us into the restaurant earlier that evening, held the door open for us to leave, he said very courteously, "Thanks for dining with us this evening." And then to Amanda, "Have a great night, Amanda."

Now Amanda was a bit flattered and pretty impressed that the host had remembered her name. One the other hand, I was somewhat creeped out. Then we realized that Amanda was still wearing her Conference ID which very clearly displayed her first name for all to see.

I make it a practice at conferences to always take my name tag or ID badge off whenever out of the conference center. If I thought I could get away with it, I wouldn't wear name tags even inside the conference center, but those IDs seem to get me places I want to go, so I just go with it. But I don't like name tags. I don't like it when people who don't know me call me by name. It feels invasive to me, too presumptive for a stranger or even a casual acquaintance to call me by name like we are old friends. That is a privilege that I feel is best reserved for those who actually know me.

I may be a bit on the extreme end of the spectrum in my sensitivity to such matters, but I think we all share in the general principle to some degree. Our identity – who we really are – is one of our most carefully held possessions. It is not lightly held, for it is not easily come by. Most of us spend or spent an immense amount of energy discerning our true selves, especially in adolescence and young adulthood. Most of us take some degree of care in revealing our selves to others, even to our closest friends and loved ones. And most of us find it helpful and meaningful to reflect on who we are and how we have come to be who we are, probing to discover deeper and deeper layers of our identity. [Insert commercial message for the "The Story of Your Life" class]

Given that reality, I resonate with Nathanael in today's gospel reading, whose first words upon meeting Jesus, who greeted him with a very flattering exclamation, were "Where did you get to know me?" Nathanael seems startled, surprised, and in my reading at least, maybe a little bit put off. Jesus couldn't really know him – they hadn't even met. At least that is how I would feel were I in Nathanael's shoes.

But Jesus does know Nathanael, and spoke true of him. And somehow, when Jesus tells him that he saw him under the fig tree, Nathanael realizes this. And he exclaims, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" In the moment of realizing that he is indeed truly known, Nathanael recognizes that he is in the presence of the divine.

Deep down, I think each of us possesses a deep and abiding desire to be truly and fully known. I know that I do, despite my sensitivity to strangers calling me by name and the care with which I hold my sense of identity. In truth, it is the high value I place on being known that drives my aversion to superficial and casual disclosure of my name or identity.

And so it is that Psalm 139 resonates profoundly with me and so many of us. While there may be some times when it is frightening or oppressive to think about an inescapable God who knows us in such detail, more often than not, these words reach into that deep and abiding part of us that longs for true connection with another and yearns for full revelation of our truest and deepest selves. The dominant themes of the Psalm are simple and clear – God knows me and God is with

me. From beginning to end, we are told just how deeply and completely God knows the Psalmist. The Hebrew word for “know” or “knowledge” occurs 7 times in Psalm 139, a number which is significant because in scripture, 7 is a number which represents wholeness or completion. The implication is that God doesn’t just know us, God knows us completely.

Moreover, God does not just know us, but is always and forever with us. The Psalmist goes to great lengths to exhaustively and emphatically state that there is no extremity that can separate him from the presence of God. Wherever he might go, whatever might become of him, God is there. For as the late Dr. John Leith remarked, “every human being has every moment to do with the Living God.”<sup>1</sup>

Taken by themselves, these two affirmations of the Psalm can be wonderful and full of comfort. As commentator Allen McSween writes, they invite us “to receive and relish an identity rooted not in the things we say about ourselves or the labels others assign us, but in the One who knows us more deeply and more lovingly than we could ever know ourselves... [For] the value of our lives does not come from what we achieve or possess or what others may think of us. It comes from the God who knows and names us, from whose steadfast love nothing in all creation can separate us.”<sup>2</sup>

And yet there is still something left to be desired. For while God knows the Psalmist through and through, the Psalmist knows very little of God, beyond the wonder of God’s works and that God is with him. For when the Psalmist tries to meditate on God’s thoughts, he is overwhelmed by the weight and number of them, as in verse 6, when he cries, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, it is so high that I cannot attain it.”

Such is our fate as human beings. Alongside that part of us that longs to be known, is another part of us that yearns to know God. Call it the “God shaped hole” in our hearts<sup>3</sup>, or proclaim that “our souls are restless until they rest in God”<sup>4</sup>, point is, there is within us something that not only wants to be known by, but also to know, God.

Which takes me back to Nathanael. This story comes from the very beginning of John’s gospel. It’s the part where Jesus is gathering disciples and saying “Follow me.” And although Jesus may indeed know Nathanael, Nathanael is just beginning to know Jesus. But the invitation is there, just as it is for us. In walking with Jesus, we learn who he is. And as we learn who Jesus is, we come to know God. It is the central mystery and wonder of the incarnation – that God is revealed in the flesh and blood person of Jesus. The revelation is not complete. We see and we know God only dimly, only in part. But as Paul proclaims in his first letter to the Corinthians, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”<sup>5</sup>

Until then, we live in the mystery – knowing that no matter where we go, or what we do, we dwell in its presence. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Allen C. McSween, Jr., in *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Vol. 1, p.248.

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Vol. 1, p.252.

<sup>3</sup> See Blaise Pascal

<sup>4</sup> See St. Augustine of Hippo

<sup>5</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:12