

Psalm 139:1-6 13-18 2 Epiphany 1.11.24 Bill Uetracht

I like being known. I truly do. One of the great things about being in a community as long as I have been is that I am known in many places. I drive my wife crazy when we go to Meijer. She wants to get the shopping done, and I want to talk—talk with the people who know me, although I must admit that sometimes they know me, and I don't know them. Where did we meet? Oh yes, was it a funeral, the symphony, a birthday party for that blonde-haired woman? Even then, in those awkward moments, I like being known. While on our recent trip to the Caribbean, I disappeared at some point, and Bev asked Liam where I was. "You know," he said. "He's out talking with some people." He's out getting known.

The old television show "Cheers" was built around the significance of being known. "I want to be where everybody knows my name." I get that. I like being known. Or do I? Sometimes I would just like to enter a place and not be recognized. I am a pastor. And a lot of times when pastors enter the room dynamics change. People change their language. They stop telling their stories. They act all pious. They tell you why they don't go to church anymore. Sometimes I want to slip into a room and not be noticed for what I do. That's one of the reasons I have liked the triathlon world. We don't talk about church; we talk about bikes, the temperature of the water, and how you could have improved your time, if only . . . Sometimes, I don't want to be known.

As I confront the well-known 139th Psalm today I sense that the author of this song, this poem, is experiencing the tension that being known brings. On the one hand, it all sounds so wonderful: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know me when I sit down and when I rise up. You search out my path and my lying down and

are acquainted with all my ways.” To be known by God in that kind of way--how wonderful! How marvelous that God is that close!

“For it was you who formed my inward parts. You knit me together in my mother’s womb. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.” In other words, even before the Psalmist was born, God was present. Even before he came onto the scene, he was known. “My frame, [my bones] were not hidden from you when I was being made in secret. Wonderful are your works, O God! I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” My little life is lived in light of something, Someone large, a majestic You, a Thou!

I love a poem that the great Jewish thinker Martin Buber wrote on this Psalm:

Where I wander – You!
Where I ponder – You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
When I am gladdened – You!
When I am saddened – You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
Sky is You, Earth is You!
You above! You below!
In every trend, at every end,
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!

The Psalm uses the word “You” frequently. God is not described in the third person—him, her, or it. God is You, profoundly intimate, amazingly near, everywhere present. “If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, [if I die], you are there.” How phenomenally comforting.

I like being known. Or do I? I think the Psalmist is not so sure about this known-ness. Listen to his words, “Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before.”

Gary Hansen at our Bible study on Wednesday said he appreciated this “hemmed-in” image. For him, it was reassuring. As he and others go through what life brings us, he appreciates knowing that he is hemmed in, that he is held. I like that. That’s good, life-giving stuff. But I suspect that the author sees this hemmed-in-ness as something disturbing. The Psalm in the Lutheran Bible is titled “The Inescapable God.” You can’t get away from God, and while that is comforting, on the one hand, it is profoundly disturbing, on the other hand.

Paul Tillich, in a very profound sermon on Psalm 139, says: “Every psychiatrist and confessor is familiar with the tremendous force of resistance in each personality against *even* trifling self-revelations. Nobody wants to be known even when [our] health and salvation depend upon such a knowledge. We don’t even wish to be known by ourselves. We try to hide the depths of our souls from our own eyes.”

I’ll admit to you that sometimes I try my best not to look in the mirror. I don’t like what I see. So, I avoid looking. Many of us don’t want to be that known. We’d rather not face the truth. So, we hide our alcoholism from ourselves. We try our best to not get input about ourselves from others who know us best. They seek to tell us what we are really like, but we often don’t want to listen. We don’t want to be that known, even to ourselves. So, we hide behind all kinds of things: our angry politics, our cynicism, our constant happy faces, our religion, our morality. We avoid what the psychologists call our “shadow selves.”

Oh man, do you see that in the political realm these days and among many so-called religious people! Many of these folks are so busy running from who they really are that everybody else gets their venom. They tell us what is wrong with everybody else, probably in order to not face the truth about themselves. And the politicians and the moralistic religious folks aren't alone in this. Most of us don't want to be that well known, even to ourselves. Being known is too burdensome. There is a price that we pay to ourselves and, yes, to others for being so known.

Some of you know that I am a collector of political buttons. Frankly, I am about ready to get rid of them, but I still have most of them--buttons from all kinds of elections, all kinds of political parties and campaigns. One button that I have focused on for a long time, thinking that it was going to make me rich—you know, give me \$5 dollars or so—is one from the McGovern campaign in 1972. The button says “McGovern Eagleton.” So what, you say? Well, Eagleton was McGovern's first choice for a running mate. But it came out that Eagleton had visited a psychiatrist. Oh my! He had to be dropped. Who wanted a vice-president who had been to a psychiatrist? So, McGovern had to print new buttons. There's a price to pay for being known.

Our gospel reading for today contains a fascinating story about known-ness. Jesus is showing up in Galilee, where he's from. And he is gathering disciples, inviting them to imitate him, to follow him. He finds a guy named Philip, a Greek. And Philip finds a guy named Nathanael, a Jew. Right away, we are given a peek into John's vision that in Jesus the whole world, Jew and Greek, is being brought together. Philip tells Nathanael that “we have found the one that all of the scriptures have been waiting for: Jesus from Nazareth.” And then Nathanael puts down Jesus and where he comes from: “Can

anything good come out of Nazareth?” That’s where the hicks come from. How can someone good and important come from Dalton, Cloverville, Conklin, Montague, Muskegon?

Now Philip, not the least bit defensive, simply says, “Come and see!” You want to know what’s going on with this guy, “Come and join us. Don’t stand at a distance. Don’t allow your preconceived notions to keep you where you are. Get up close and personal.”

Well, Jesus, listening to all of this banter, proceeds to identify Nathanael as the ideal Israelite, one in whom there is no deceit. Really? The guy just used an ethnic slur. He just put Jesus down.

“Where did you get to *know* me?” Nathanael asks Jesus. “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you,” Jesus responds. Rabbis often sat underneath fig trees when they were studying. Jesus saw him before he saw Jesus. Jesus knew him before he knew Jesus.

Nathanael was known. And it appears, even in all of his ugliness. If I had been Jesus and I had heard Nathanael’s ethnic slur leveled against me, I would have gone elsewhere to find somebody to follow me. Jesus knows him and still calls him.

To be known is a terribly uncomfortable thing. Many of us run from being known. It’s why some folks stay away from church. It’s why some of us run from God. The very reality of God makes us uncomfortable. But hear this. It is love that knows you. It is love that knew you even before you were born. It is love that accompanies you whether you are alive or dead. It is love that hems you in. Even the self that you try to hide not only from others, but from yourself, is known in love.

Paul Tillich says: “We are known in a depth of darkness through which we ourselves do not even dare to look. And at the same time, we are seen in a height of a fulness which surpasses our highest

vision.” We can’t hide, but why would we want to? We are seen in a height of a fulness which surpasses anything we can imagine. We live in a light of a fulness, a love, that created us, a love that sustains us, a love that will be our final home. Maybe all the game playing is over. Maybe all the running is finished. Maybe the key is to join Nathanael and Philip in allowing ourselves to be found, to be known.

“Take, Oh take me as I am. Summon out what I shall be. Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.” (sung)