

The Second Baptist **Pulpit**

“Searched and Known”

Psalm 139:1-18

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What does it mean to be known?

We've all seen and heard about the remarkable US Airways plane that ran into some birds, lost its engines, and crash-landed on the Hudson River.

All 150 passengers survived. There was that amazing picture of the plane in the water with all the passengers standing on the wings.

The pilot, Chesley Sullenberger, is getting a lot of well-deserved praise and attention for his skill and cool head. I noticed yesterday on Facebook, the social networking website, that you can become a “fan” of Chesley Sullenberger. As of yesterday, over 180,000 people had become fans.

Sullenberger is having his 15 minutes of fame. He is suddenly well-known. But he's not known in the sense that

we're talking about today. There's a difference between being famous and being known.

Probably you have also followed to some extent—How can you help it?—on the news or in the newspaper the trial of Jeffrey Scott for the murder of his wife Ashley Scott. The trial is of course revealing all the intimate and unpleasant and messy details of their lives.

We are learning all kinds of things about the Scotts' marriage. But even so, we don't know them in the sense that we're talking about today. There's a difference between voyeurism and really knowing someone.

When we talk about being known this morning, it's something very different from being famous or knowing the gossipy details about another person. It's what's expressed in the Psalm:

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.

You hem me in behind and before.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I make my bed in Sheol (hell) you are there.

If I ... settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

Even there your hand shall lead me.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;

You knit me together in my mother's womb.

My frame was not hidden from you,

When I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

You are known.

I think some of us may hear that as both good news and bad news. God has searched you and knows you—every bit of you. And you cannot hide. That's the news, and you have to decide if it's good or bad. The truth is for most of us it is both.

Frederick Buechner has a memoir called *Telling Secrets*. In it he writes:

I have come to believe that, by and large, the human family all has the same secrets, which are both very telling and very important to tell. Telling, in the sense that they reveal the central paradox of our condition....that what we hunger for (more than anything else) is to be fully known, and yet that is often what we fear more than anything else (being fully known).

Yet they are important to tell, because otherwise we run the risk of losing track of who we are. And come to accept, instead, the highly-edited version we show the world, in hopes that the world will find the edited version more acceptable than the real thing.

We guard the information we share about ourselves with others. We take great care in revealing who we really are, sometimes even to our closest friends and family members.

And according to this Psalm, not only does God know everything about us, but God hems us in behind us and in front of us. He blocks our path, and if we try to turn around and go another direc-

tion, there God is waiting for us.

You might start to feel claustrophobic just thinking about this. There's something a little disturbing about it. God knows everything about me?

I can't get away?

I can't manage my image with God?

To be fully known— often it is what we fear more than anything else. But there's the paradox, because it is also what we hunger for more than anything else.

Garrison Keillor has a story about the power of being known. He told about a young boy on a bus with his aunt. They decided to play a game that they did not know one another. The boy then made up stories about how he wasn't from Lake Wobegone at all. In fact, his parents were famous actors in New York City, and he was going there to meet them. The aunt then made up a story and said she didn't have any nephews.

Suddenly the young boy began to be disturbed by the game. He says, I don't *like*

this game. Say that you know me.

She replied, *I don't know you.*

With a note of desperation in his voice, he said, *Say you know me!*

She said, *I don't know you.*

Finally, when he is almost in tears, she touches his knee and says, *It's okay. I know you.*

We really do want to be known. Despite all of the defenses you put up to protect yourself, you really do want someone to know you, to really know you. That's the power God has with us. God knows us, the real us. God searches for us and finds out all about us.

And are you noticing in this psalm, it's about God searching for us, God knowing us, not the other way around? That's the mistake we usually make. We talk about finding God, finding Jesus or knowing God, knowing Jesus. What the Bible is talking about here though is God finding us, God knowing us. This psalm is written by a

person whose relationship with God is a result of God's persistence, God's search and pursuit.

That gives us a different way of thinking about religion. Instead of religion being about the human pursuit of God, religion becomes instead the activity, the way, human beings respond to God's initiative.

[John Buchanan, "Inescapable God," January 16, 2000, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois]

Religion is our response to God's pursuit. And that is a theme found throughout the Bible. God pursuing and people responding.

Samuel, Samuel.

Saul, Saul.

Abraham, Abraham.

Arise, Jonah.

Moses, take off your shoes.

It's not about us finding God, us knowing God. My story is about being found and being known. That's the real power in that word that some Baptists often use to describe people's spiritual condition: lost. We get lost. We stray—from our best intentions, our promises, our loves, our

commitments. We stray from our own better selves and from God, and we get lost. And the good news is that God doesn't give up on us but follows us and comes after us and finds us.

If you're someone who likes to read good books, here are three current Christian writers who are among the best: Henri Nouwen, Kathleen Norris, and Frederick Buechner. You hear me refer to these writers often; I admire them not only because of their eloquence but also because of their honesty. All three of them speak about their own experience of being found and being known.

Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest, popular teacher and writer before he died not very long ago, wrote a wonderful book on the Prodigal Son. Actually, it is a personal meditation on Rembrandt's masterpiece "The Return of the Prodigal," which hangs in the Hermitage.

In the painting, the son is kneeling in front of his father, an elderly, dignified man. The father's hands are placed on his son's shoulders. Nouwen noticed that one hand

was masculine, but the tapered fingers on the other hand were decidedly feminine, and concluded, if there were ever any doubt, that the father is really a symbol of God's love, which is both paternal and maternal and, most important of all, a love that everyone of us desperately needs.

When Nouwen first saw Rembrandt's masterpiece, it was at the end of a long and arduous journey. Nouwen was tired, exhausted from his demanding schedule of traveling and lecturing, and he wrote about the painting that *it brought me into touch with something within me that lies beyond the ups and downs of a busy life, something that represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the yearning for a final return, a sense of safety, a lasting home.*

And then Nouwen became confessional in a way most of us can understand: *the question is not 'How am I to find God?' but 'How am I to let myself be found by him?' Not 'How am I to know God?' but "How am I to let myself be known?" Not 'How am I to love God?'*

but 'How am I to let myself be loved by God?'

God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, longing to bring me home. . . . Can I accept that I am worth looking for?

[p. 100–101].

Kathleen Norris, who hadn't been to church for years and hadn't thought much about it, started attending her grandparents' Presbyterian church in Lemon, South Dakota. Norris describes her experience this way, *I came to understand that God hadn't lost me, even if I seemed for years to have misplaced God*. Older mentors nudged her gently, she remembers, and one said to her, *If you don't feel as close to God as you used to, who do you suppose moved?* [*Amazing Grace*, p. 3].

And then Frederick Buechner, who had virtually no religious experience or affiliation, trying to be a writer in New York City and not doing very well, walked into a Madison Avenue Presbyterian church one Sunday morning because he had nothing better to do, heard George Buttrick preach, and

later wrote about his experience, *At the end I am left with no other way of saying it than what I found was Christ—or was found. It hardly seems to matter which.*

[*The Sacred Journey*, p. 6]

All three of them sensing the truth of Psalm 139:

You have searched and known me.

Not finding but being found.
Not knowing but being known.

Not all on me to find God with effort and ingenuity but simply allowing myself to be found and to be known.

I talked earlier about that good news/bad news feeling about this. By the end of the psalm, there's no more feeling ambiguous about being known. The psalmist actually invites God to intrude, to invade his private life: Verse 23: *Search me...and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.*

In the end, we really do hunger to be known, to be found.

Imagine when you were a kid, and you and your brothers and sisters would play

hide-and-seek. You remember how it goes. One person is “it.” Whoever is “it” hides their eyes, counts to a hundred, and then says, *Ready or not, here I come!* And by then you’re supposed to be hidden. Then the person who’s “it” comes looking around, trying to find the person and touch them before they get back to the base. If they get someone, then that person is “it.”

Imagine your sister is “it.” She cheats. Well, she starts off honestly; she says, *1,2,3,4,5,6,7,93,94.* But you’ve got a place under the porch and under the steps of the porch. You’re small; you can fit in there, and you know she’ll never find you.

99, 100. Ready or not, here I come! And here she comes, in the house, out of the house, down by the trees, in the weeds, behind the bushes. She can’t find you, and you almost give yourself away down there snickering to yourself, *She’ll never find me here, she’ll never find me here.* Then it occurs to you: she’ll never find you here.

So after awhile, you stick out a toe. When she comes by and sees your toe, she says, *Uh oh, I see you,* and she gets down there and tags you before you can get to base. She says, *You’re it.*

And you say, *Shoot, you found me.*

[thanks to Dr. Fred Craddock for the idea for this story]

You stuck your toe out because you want what everybody here wants, even the ones of us who are trying our best to hide, guarding against revealing our true selves—what everybody here wants, and that is not to be lost but to be found, not to be a step removed, distant, unknown but to be known—fully and finally.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You have found me and surrounded me. And I am glad.

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