



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, ASSOCIATE TO THE RECTOR
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 14, 2018

1 SAMUEL 3:1-20; PSALM 139:1-5, 12-17; 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20; JOHN 1:43-51

KNOWN BY GOD

John 1:43-51 [*Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."*]

In this country, we value our privacy. We create physical privacy with fences around our homes and hedges in front of our windows. We expect emotional privacy when we share our inner thoughts with others. We guard our personal information with passwords and encryption software. We view privacy as a right, something essential for every individual. We want to control what others know of us, and we are willing to spend time and money to increase that sense of control.

Scholars say the reason we value privacy is not for privacy itself, but because the heart

of privacy is intimacy.¹ When we are confident that our space is private, we have more spontaneity in relationships. We reach out more freely. We laugh more quickly and are less filtered in telling our story. The capacity for all kinds of intimacy -- collegiality, friendship, romance -- seems to depend on assurances of privacy.

At the same time, social isolation in the US is increasing with negative consequences on health.

This isolation can start out as privacy -- living alone because I don't want others in

my business, only communicating electronically so I can better monitor what I say. But if the focus on privacy creates too many layers of separation from others, it becomes its own barrier to intimacy. In the last 30 years, the percentage of American adults who say they're lonely has doubled from 20 percent to 40 percent.ⁱⁱ

Why am I talking about this? Because I want to point out that we constantly choose between intimacy and privacy. As humans, we yearn for connection -- it's the key to well-being. And, we try to restrict what others know about us. We're always balancing. To be clear: the desire for privacy is not bad, and studies show that living alone does not necessarily predispose a person to loneliness. Further, people who regularly attend religious services are statistically happier socially and they live longer.ⁱⁱⁱ So good for you!

But here's the challenging part. Our habit of holding both privacy and intimacy in our human connections doesn't prepare us to receive the gift of relationship with God. And it may get in the way of understanding a fundamental truth that is woven through the readings today.

We are known completely by God. I am, and you are, and we are together. We are known completely by God.

We affirm this each week when we pray, "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid."^{iv} We find it in the Old Testament story today when God persistently seeks Samuel until Samuel understands it is not a human voice that calls him but God's own. We hear it in the gospel as Jesus calls disciples by making strangers into friends, saying "Follow me." When Jesus tells Nathaniel that he has seen him under the fig tree, Nathaniel blurts out "You are the King of Israel." Not because the fig tree is important, but because Nathaniel realizes that he is known by God, and that changes his life.

The psalm today sums it up:

Oh God, you have searched me out and known me;

You trace my journeys and my resting-places.

You knit me together in my mother's womb.

I will thank you because I am marvelously made;

Your works are wonderful, and I know it well.^v

The psalmist affirms that the source of all life, the one who sustains and loves all of creation, also knows him. Completely. This knowledge is too much to take in, impossible to fully understand. How could it be that infinite, perfect Love is concerned

with finite, flawed me? And yet, that is a pillar of our faith.

When we consider what it means to be fully known by God, it is OK to feel a little uneasy. There is a deep sense of vulnerability. I'm reminded of the Bible story of the first man and woman, who hide from God when they realize their fallibility. We, ourselves, find it hard to face the reality of our inner life or the raw footage of our daily actions without deletions and touch-ups. Why would we willingly reveal it all to someone else?

Yet the choice to reveal ourselves is not ours. It is already done. We are fully known by God.

Our choice then is what to do, how to live with this amazing knowledge. We can ignore it, and strive to craft an identity from our own actions and the opinions of others. Or we can surrender to it and embrace an identity rooted in the "one who knows us more deeply and more lovingly than we could ever know ourselves."^{vi} That is what Jesus beckons the disciples to, and what we are called to as well. When we open ourselves to the loving presence of God, we no longer want to hide. We want to see ourselves through God's eyes, and receive the strength to become our true selves.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote about his experience with this.^{vii} He says,

"[When] I became a part of the leadership of the Montgomery bus protest, I was confronted with the trials of life. Almost immediately, we began to receive threatening telephone calls and letters in our home... They increased day after day. As the weeks passed, I realized that many of the threats were in earnest. I felt myself faltering and growing in fear.

"After a particularly strenuous day, ... the telephone rang. 'Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.' I hung up, but I could not sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point...

"When my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. 'I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid... I am at the end of my powers . . . I have come to the point where I can't face it alone.'

"At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine [as never before]... I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to pass from me.... I was ready to face anything. The outer

situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.”

That is what Dr. King wrote. I expect at some point in our lives, each of us finds ourselves at the saturation point, with all our fears coming down at once. It is then that we must remember that we are known completely and lovingly by God. And we can turn toward that Love, trusting in renewal.

Here is how Dr. King sums it up:

“Admitting the weighty problems and staggering disappointments, Christianity affirms that God is able to give us the power

to meet them. [God] is able to give us the inner equilibrium to stand tall amid the trials and burdens of life. [God] is able to provide inner peace amid outer storms.

This inner stability of the [person] of faith is Christ’s chief legacy to his disciples. He offers neither material resources nor a magical formula that exempts us from suffering and persecution, but he brings an imperishable gift: “Peace I leave with you.” This is that peace which [passes] all understanding.”^{viii}

Amen.

ⁱ Julie C. Inness, *Privacy, Intimacy and Isolation*, Oxford 1992.

ⁱⁱ Dhruv Khullar, “How Social Isolation is Killing Us,” *New York Times*, December 22, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeffrey Dorfman, “Religion is Good for All of Us, Even Those Who Don’t Follow One,” *Forbes.com*, December 22, 2013.

^{iv} Collect for Purity, *Book of Common Prayer*.

^v Psalm 139.

^{vi} *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1, 252.

^{vii} Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, Fortress Press 1981, 113-114.

^{viii} *Ibid*, 112.



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