

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn
“To Know and Be Known”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, September 8, 2019

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, ‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.” Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Psalm 139

*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 search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night’,
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
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.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them — they are more than the sand;
I come to the end — I am still with you.*

*O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me —
those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Let us pray. Our gracious and living God, may we know your spirit among us. May we hear the word that you would have us hear. May my words be in accord with your will and your way and your truth. What we pray all of this in the name of Christ, Amen.

Well, I'm going to begin this morning with something that I rarely do. And that is, I'm going to quote John Calvin. Now you might think that since I've been a pastor in the Presbyterian Church for 49 years, and that John Calvin is the father of the Reformed Tradition, and the Presbyterian Church is a part of that Reformed Tradition, that I would have quoted John Calvin many times. But I must confess to you, the fact is, I have not. And so that is why this is, in a way, a red-lettered day in my preaching. And wonder of wonders, you actually get to be here to hear it. Because I know you woke up this morning and thought to yourself, "Is he going to quote John Calvin today [laughter]"? So near the beginning of Calvin's seminal work, the Institutes of the Christian Religion, he argues that, "One can not truly know God without knowing oneself. And one can not know oneself without knowing God." Now he does acknowledge the obvious dilemma that this creates. I suppose a kind of chicken and egg scenario, I don't know, but he goes on to say, "Which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern." Amen to that. Really isn't an answerable question and we probably shouldn't even try. Knowledge of God and knowledge of oneself. But there's a third kind of knowledge and that is the knowledge that God has of us. To know and be known.

Now we, of course, can not thoroughly know God and that's a good thing I think. There is a mystery that surrounds the holy, but nor I suspect can we truly, completely know ourselves. There are always, it seems to me, are new discoveries as we journey through life together. New discoveries about ourselves. But the writer of Psalm 139, and we want to concur with him I think, we do trust that God has searched us and known us — searched us and known us through and through that, we do trust that God knows us completely. There is no hiding from the presence of God, from the presence of the Holy, even in our darkest moments. Now, that might seem like a disturbing prospect to you, that God knows us, warts and all that God knows us and all of our little neuroses, maybe some a little bigger than little. It's all stuff that we most of the time try to hide from one another, but that cannot be hidden from God. And I must say that I think that that is somehow reassuring the fact that we are known so thoroughly, so completely, better than we know ourselves. There's something reassuring about that. Because in spite of such knowledge, or maybe we should say because of it, God's still whispers to us, "I love you." And when we stray, God does not give up on us but forgives us and calls us back over and over again over again, forgives us and calls us back, calls us back to the way of compassion and to the way of peace. In sickness, God's spirit can be a comforting presence and a healing presence. And in our lowest moments, in our darkest moments, the Psalmist affirms that even there, the Holy spirit, the Holy love, and compassion

accompany us. That powerful symbol of the Christian faith, of the suffering Christ on the cross, whatever our lowest moments, we can be assured. We can be assured that the Christ has been there. So no matter how much we despair about our supposedly faults and about our weaknesses and about our sometimes lack of courage, no matter how much we despair about all of that, no matter how much we inwardly beat up on ourselves, and we do that, still, even there, we are searched and we are known, forgiven and loved, fearfully and wonderfully made. So that we can say with confidence and without fear with the Psalmist when He concludes, "Search me O God and know my heart, test me and know my thoughts and see if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."

Serving on the staff of the spiritual director training program at San Francisco Theological Seminary. As I've done over the years. I've of course, over all those years have met many of the students. They're there. They were there for three years, every January for three weeks. So there was a lot of opportunity to really get to know folks. And there was one woman who near the end of her time, brought her husband to class one day and I had the chance to meet him. Her husband was a pediatrician in San Francisco. His name was Dr. Thomas Boyce and while I was talking with him-- we had a really stimulating conversation and, while I was talking to him, he referenced the book in which he had an article. So I made sure I got the book and read the article, and in that book, he wrote of a patient that he had. A dying seven-year-old boy named Blake. Blake was afflicted with a horrible, very rare, disfiguring disease. I'm not even going to attempt to pronounce it, but it left his eyes protruding from his face, his chest and belly glutted and swollen, his liver and spleen many times their normal size, his four limbs were largely useless. And, as Dr. Boyce described it, he said it all in all was a grotesque sight and seven-year-old Blake was not overly grateful for all of the abundant, cutting edge medical care that was being offered to him at San Francisco Medical. He had decided that the needle sticks, and the probes, and the serial examinations were doing very little, if nothing at all, to relieve the symptoms of his horrible disease. And so the approach of doctors, and nurses, and technicians, and other hospital personnel was greeted by Blake with a raspy, incoherent grunt and a flailing of his arm that indisputably meant, "Get out of my face." All of this made him a very difficult patient to care for, to deal with. Hospital personnel weren't sure how to approach him. The physical side of him combined with his antagonism and indifference making it very difficult. But one July evening, Dr. Blake was late making his rounds and he approached Blake's room and saw that his young, single mom, who had been at work all day that day, was in the room sitting on the edge of the bed, immersed in conversation with Blake. Dr. Boyce paused outside the door. He didn't want to interrupt. He was transfixed by what was occurring inside. "In hushed and comforting tones, Blake's mother spoke of her day, asked Blake about his day, reviewing for him all the events of her day. And as she spoke, leaning over her son, her hands stroked his forehead and hair in a gesture that simply filled the room with that mother's love for that boy. And Blake's eyes, moist and utterly devoid of his usual stern antagonism and resistance, looked up into his mother's face, absorbing every moment, every piece of her presence with him, relaxed and more peaceful than I had ever seen him," Dr. Boise said. Blake seemed to melt into his mother's eyes, and she stroked his round, swollen face, and said to him, "Oh, my beautiful little boy. My beautiful, little boy." "Suddenly," says Dr. Boyce, "I understood what I had not previously understood. When this mother gazed at her bloated, dying son, she physically saw a person that I had never seen. Transformed by her eyes' willingness to see her child beyond the disease, Blake had become a different being. An individual no longer diseased and distorted, but simply a frightened child visibly changed by his mother's love." To see as God sees. To hear as the Christ hears. Oh, Lord, you have searched me and known me.

This mother is a human example of the way that God sees us beyond our weaknesses and faults. Sees us and all who live on this earth. To the desperate immigrant who crosses our border, to the sick child who comes here seeking medical care, to the average family of four or five or six on Main Street, USA, and to the very rich on Wall Street. This mother is a human example of the way God sees all of us. And, as followers of the ways of Jesus, as believers in God's love, and as recipients of God's grace and God's forgiveness, we are called to attempt to search and to know not only ourselves but all who we encounter, as well. Not that we will do it perfectly. Of course, we won't. But it is this kind of love and compassion that I submit to you is at the very heart of creation, and that offers itself to us a better way, and it is to be led in the way everlasting. Amen