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Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18
John 1: 43-51

“Where Did You Come to Know Me?”

Psalm 139 is one my favorite pieces of scripture. *“O Lord you have searched and known me.”* It is personal, powerful and poetic. It speaks eloquently about God’s transcendence, the idea that God is so far beyond us and our imagining of God, *and* at the same time of God’s immanence, the idea that God knows each of us better than we know ourselves. It can be of great comfort to have faith that the God of the universe knows us this intimately. It can also be of great challenge.

What does it mean to say that the God that created all things also *“formed my inward parts”* and *“knit me together in my mother’s womb?”* What does it mean to say that the God who sets the planets and stars in motion also knows *“when I sit down and when I rise up?”* And what does it mean to say that the God who knows and care for me in this way, also knows and cares for you, and all people, not only people who are like me or that I like, but also people who are different from me or people I just can’t bring myself to like? The Psalmist is right: *“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high I cannot attain it.”*

“Where did you come to know me?” It sounds like it could be the Psalmist question to God, but in our Gospel lesson this is Nathaniel’s question to Jesus. *“Where did you come to know me?”* And Jesus answers him, *“I saw you under a fig tree before Philip called you.”* In other words, even before we met, I knew you. This is the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry and his first task is to gather disciples, partners in ministry. Just prior to the passage we read for today, John

introduces Jesus to his first two disciples: Andrew and Peter. Then, as we just read, Jesus finds Philip and calls him by simply saying, "Follow me," so Philip does. Philip's friend Nathaniel is not such an easy sale though. At first, he resists. He is not too sure about Jesus, but when he meets him his opinion almost immediately changes. And you'll notice that what changes his mind isn't Philip's description of Jesus. Nor is it anything that Nathaniel ascertains about Jesus on his own, but the experience of being known by him. Isn't that what we all want: to be known by someone? "*Where did you come to know me?*" he asks in amazement and gratitude.

There are two things here in this story that I want to draw our attention to this morning, because I think they are instrumental to how we view the life of faith. First, notice that not even Jesus is expected to go it alone. He needs friends, companions. He too desires to be close to others. The other thing is that Jesus not only initiates the relationship with his disciples, through the relationship they are together transformed by God's love. To me, this says something profound about the way we experience God. We experience God in each other, like it says every week in our bulletin where we list the prayer concerns: *We look to the Lord for strength and healing. We look to each other to see our Lord in action.*

It occurs to me that so many people go about religion, including us much of the time, the opposite way. We come to church with the idea of becoming closer to God, but not closer to one another. I once read that, "Being a Christian means to be deeply connected to God while at the same time being fully human and participating in all the joys and challenges that life brings relationally and socially...To be immersed in God finally does not draw us away from engaging in

all of life...The Christian engaging the neighbor and the work colleague should not bring an air of superiority or a spirit of judgmentalism. Instead, we are challenged to bring understanding, compassion, and a deep desire to know the other person and to be a blessing...We should see every person as [also being fearfully and wonderfully made by God] and therefore as persons of dignity and equality, irrespective of race, gender, education, training and temperament.”¹

This reminds me of something that Martin Luther King, Jr. once said. He said, “Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of [people] and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that cripple them, is a dry-as-dust religion.” In other words, we cannot endeavor to know God while ignoring our neighbors. The church is not first spiritual and then about charity, rather it finds its spiritual calling precisely in serving others and getting to know one another. As we get to know one another, and recognize our common humanity, as we recognize that each one of us and all of us collectively are *fearfully and wonderfully made*, our compassion for all people will grow. We will no longer be able to sit back and passively accept the suffering of any of our brothers or sisters, because we will recognize that until all of us are made well, none of us can truly know healing or justice or peace.

“*Where did you come to know me?*” It is Nathaniel’s question to Jesus. Perhaps like the Psalmist, with awe and wonder, it is also our question to God, *but first* it should be our question to one another. We have a place here, a space within this church, within this congregation to get to know—to really know one another—without the normal defenses we take out into the world, to share from

¹ Charles R. Ringma, *Seeking the Silences with Thomas Merton* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003) p.94.

the heart with one another, to be vulnerable to one another. Sometimes I think we are afraid to do this because the prospect of being known scares us. Other times, I think we worry about making the church into a social club. But perhaps we should be more worried about being a community of people who want to know God, but don't really even know each other that well.

It is often said that God comes to each of us every day in the disguise of someone who needs our help, or someone who challenges us to grow, or even someone who offers us comfort or encouragement. If this is true, even just a little, it means that being open to others and being open to God are two sides of the same coin and that in getting to know one another we just may find that we are also drawn closer to the God of the Universe, the God whose eyes beheld our unformed substance. Amen.