

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 21, 2023

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## ***Known and Knowing***

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who's the person you know the **best**? Perhaps a spouse or partner. Maybe a family member or a close friend. Why do you feel as though you know that person the best? How do we judge how well we know the people around us? What are the determining factors that allow you to make such a claim? What do you use to measure how well you know someone? Length of time? Diversity of experiences with them? How well you can predict their responses to things?

Now, who's the person who knows **you** the best? Is it the same person you thought of previously? If so, what leads to that reciprocity of knowledge? If not, what's the difference between these individuals? How do you measure who knows you the best? Their ability to empathize with you? How they make you feel? Your ability to be vulnerable around them? Their ability to anticipate your words or actions?

Finally, how well do you know God? How might you answer some of the previous questions while thinking about God? How might you assess your relationship with God? Do you feel as though your relationship with God is strong? If so, why? And if not, why not? Do you feel comfortable being vulnerable with God? Can you name some times when you felt particularly close to God? Particularly distant? What changed between those experiences? How well do you **feel** God knows you?<sup>1</sup>

These are tough questions, aren't they? And I don't believe these are questions we often stop to reflect on. But I tend to think that these are the sorts of questions that really get us to delve more deeply into our values and the faith we have from God. Not only are the questions important for mirror-work, they are integral to the Way of Christ. Allow me to point out verse 3 of

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<sup>1</sup> Not how well does God know you...but rather how known do you **FEEL** by God?

our Gospel text today: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”<sup>2</sup>

The Way of Christ, the Way of eternal and abundant life, involves knowing God. And, I would argue, being known by God. Now that may seem obvious, of course we are known by the one who created us. But I don’t just mean the reality of God knowing us...I mean our acknowledgement of that reality. God know us in deeper and more intimate ways than we can ever know. God knows every hair on our heads and every fiber of our being. What does it mean for us to see that God knows us, trust in that knowing, and then live as though the source of life and love see us completely and loves us as we are. This is one part of walking the Way, living in the knowledge that we are seen and known.

Paul understands this point in a deep and powerful way! It should come as no surprise that the one who was confronted by God and struck blind on the road to Damascus would know what it means to be completely seen and known. This experience of God led Paul to teach things like this in his letter to the church in Corinth: “For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul was fully known by God, and his eventual acknowledgement of that led to a lifetime of witnessing to the Word of God. You are fully known by God too; I wonder what that means for **YOUR** life. Does that thought make you nervous or comforted? Perhaps both! And frankly, that knowledge should make you both nervous and comforted!

Back to those questions I started with about who you know the best and who knows you the best. One line of questioning I want to reiterate in particular: how do you know who knows you the best? How do you know who you know the best? How do you measure such things?

The Greek word for “knowing” that Jesus uses so frequently in John,<sup>4</sup> γινώσκωσιν, gives us one possible answer to measurement. Contrary to our Western understanding of knowledge, the way this word is used in Scripture has little to do with comprehension or intelligence. Rather, γινώσκωσιν has a

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<sup>2</sup> John 17:3 (NRSVUE)

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

<sup>4</sup> 54 of the 103 times the word occurs in the NT are in John.

strong connotation of intimacy and relationship. Remember, this is the same culture that uses “knowing” someone as a euphemism for sexual intimacy.<sup>5</sup>

How’s that for a measurement? No, not sexual intimacy. But definitely intimacy and relationship. Or, even more simply, love. I strongly suspect that the people you thought of at the start of this sermon are people whom you love and who love you. Love seems to be an essential element for knowing one another. And it is certainly essential for our knowing and being known by God.

And this eternal life: knowing God and being known by God...loving God and being loved by God. This linkage is no great shock, though we can easily overlook it. Jesus even says in John 13:35 that love is how people will **know** we are walking his Way. And before that we find Jesus linking knowing, truth, and freedom altogether. In John 8:32 we read, “and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” We are to be intimate with the truth, to love the truth. And what is the truth? We heard that just two weeks ago in John 14:6, “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

So, let’s reword those first questions. Who do you love most completely? Who in your life is willing to be vulnerable and intimate with you? Who loves you the most completely? Who can you be truly yourself around? Who do you trust enough to reveal your deepest darkness to, trusting that they will still love and accept you? And where is God in the midst of this knowing and loving?

It is in the midst of these relationships that we experience the truest life. These relationships are what we were created for. Pursuing such relationships of loving trust, acceptance, and vulnerability are one of the best ways we walk the Way of Christ. So, one last question to leave you with. Now that you’ve spent some time thinking about your dearest, most intimate relationships; how might God be calling you to better know the people around you, the world around you?

I leave you with this quote from Albert Einstein, “A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a

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<sup>5</sup> c.f. Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; 38:9; 1 Samuel 1:19

kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty." Amen.