

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 21, 2024

Known

Readings

Bulletin

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“I know my own and my own know me.”¹ This is a simple, yet powerfully profound statement in the midst of all this shepherd talk. It certainly makes sense from a shepherd's point of view. In many areas of the world multiple flocks must share grazing land, which means the sheep of several different folds often mix together. You'd think that would cause problems as sheep can be difficult to tell apart. But when the time comes to leave, the sheep know which human is their shepherd and the shepherd can typically recognize their sheep (or at least the key ones).

But I think the knowing that Jesus is talking about here goes much deeper than mere recognition. Throughout all four of the Gospels Jesus demonstrates a powerful curiosity towards the people around him. Not only that, but as I have observed in past sermons, Jesus is also remarkably adept at meeting people where they are. The witness of Scripture then, speaks to Christ's desire to know people deeply, usually in order to serve their needs and restore them to wholeness and righteousness.

Who knows you the best? Your spouse or partner? Your best friend? A parent? Some other relative? Who do you know the best? Who do you feel as though you have some insight into their deeper selves? I saw a relationship meme² the other day that strikes me as particularly relevant to this sermon. It's a picture of two people lying closely together on the ground looking up at the sky. One of the figures is pointing upwards, perhaps at a cloud or star. A quote from Nina LaCour accompanies the image, reading: “How amazing is it to find someone who wants to hear all about the things that go on in your head.” That's the knowing I'm talking about here. Who in your life do you want to know the inner workings of their thoughts? Who do you trust enough to share such vulnerability with?

¹ John 10:14b (NRSVue)

² <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/a4/c9/09/a4c90969ef2705678f4d5fd673621e2e--find-someone-who-card-reading.jpg>

Jesus talks about knowing his own. And I think the knowing he's talking about here is this sort of deep knowing. The sort of knowing that really wants to know what drives you, what motivates you. The sort of knowing that won't take "I'm fine" as an acceptable answer to the question, "How are you?" The sort of knowing that always goes deeper...perhaps even deeper than we might be comfortable with. It is also the sort of knowing that is grounded in love.

Such loving knowing of others involves patience and compassion. It involves not assuming the worst about other people's motives. It means taking an empathetic and compassionate stance towards the people around you. And it means, having come to some knowledge of your neighbor, using that knowing of them to better love and serve them. Or, to bring in a quote from elsewhere in John, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."³

Knowing and being known, at least in the teachings of Jesus, involves relationship. Knowledge, in this way, serves love...serves connection and community. The connection between knowledge and relationship is found all over in the teachings of Christ:

"No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (John 1:18)

"Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him because I am from him, and he sent me." (John 7:28-29)

"And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3)

Knowing Jesus means knowing God and that knowing also means relationship, connection. Being known by Jesus means being known by God. Being known by God means being pursued by goodness and mercy. It means having our needs provided for with still waters and green pastures. It means having the comforting presence of God even when we're in the darkest shadows of death, even in the presence of our enemies.

³ John 15:12-13 (NRSVue)

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’”⁴ God knows you. God knows every thought that flits through your head. God knows every secret and motivation you have. God knows every hair on your head...every fiber of your being. And along with that knowing comes love and compassion, patience and mercy. This is how you are known by God. I suspect it’s also how those who love you deepest know you too. And I hope it’s how you know others in your life too.

This knowing requires a great deal of vulnerability though, doesn’t it? And that’s something we humans aren’t always comfortable with. There are numerous examples of people who are uncomfortable at the thought of being known by God. The examples of the Pharisees and religious leaders come to mind quickly. They felt they already knew God...they had the Creator of the Universe nicely placed in a box to enforce the systems that they benefitted greatly from. Jesus knew them, though they never seemed to know him back. Jesus knew them as the broken selfish people they were and he challenged them. He tried to teach them the true way to know God...by loving and serving our neighbors; by seeing in one another the very image of God. But they couldn’t or wouldn’t; and so their lives are lessened, and the full and abundant life that God promises may elude them.

That’s the tricky bit of all of this. God knows us and calls us to try and know one another better. We are called to lay down our false selves and be who God created us to be with one another. We are called to lower our defenses, leave our comfort zones, and be vulnerable with the people...the world around us. Being caught in the eternal, compassionate, and loving gaze of God, we are invited to look at one another (and ourselves) with that same graceful gaze.

We are called to acknowledge our brokenness, and the brokenness of the world around us. That’s a part of knowing and being known. Then we are called to the work of restoration and creation. Lovingly working to know one another better so that we can better love one another. Knowing one another better in order to better know God too.

Hear this and know it: you are known...completely and totally. And you are loved... completely and totally. Having been known you are called to better know others. You are called to the Way of Christ, the Way of holy curiosity and a compassionate gaze. We are called to the vulnerability of being known and the love of knowing others. Amen.

⁴ John 14:6-7