

Lord Knows

Reading from the New Testament: Colossians 1:15, 17, 1 Corinthians 13:12b

Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 139:1-12; 23-24

We tend to know a few things about a lot of people and a lot of things about very few people. Take my first college roommate. Tom and I roomed together for 2 years after having been track teammates for four years in high school. Tom had that cool bronzed surfer dude look complete with the flowing golden locks which belied his introverted, studious ways. He was quiet, didn't go out much. In fact, some of the guys in the dorm razzed him about it, calling him Brown's recluse.

Tom was smart, with a wider and more in-depth understanding of the world than your typical college freshman, which in our world meant that he actually read books for pleasure. Tom had enviable skills with tools. His dad was a psychologist in my hometown, and with Tom designed and built an environmentally sustainable home in the woods outside of town. That boded well for me, seeing that because of those skills we had the best loft in the dorm, which was really cool ... well except for that time I fell out of it half asleep.

Was Tom a good friend? Yes, I'd say so. I mean, he put up with me for four years of high school and two years as a college roommate. So yes, we were good friends. Yet, looking back, I can't say that I truly knew Tom, what made him tick, what truths he held most dear, what flaws he kept hidden from general view, the source of his deepest fears or greatest hopes. Tom didn't let on much, which was fine with me, because I've been known to have the same tendency. I can tell you a lot more about our experiences together than I can tell you about who Tom was.

After our sophomore year, he transferred to *that other* university across the state line that it pains me to actually pronounce without mouthwash, The University of Kansas. There, Tom would study architecture, and now I saw that he is the University's director of capital planning. I haven't seen or talked with Tom in over 35 years, yet if we were to meet tomorrow, we'd probably pick up right where we left off. He was a good guy, but did I know him, or did he know me? Somewhat.

And aren't the majority of our relationships, friendships ... somewhat? Social distance isn't limited to the physical space between

us. The guardrails to your interior life are comparable to the German fortifications at Normandy. Penetrating them involves great challenge and significant risk.

In fact, there are probably several rooms in your interior life to which you don't even have access. We're so adept at masking what's deep within us that we manage to fool ourselves. When someone is always saying things like, "Well, that's just who I am;" "I'm an open book;" "I tell it like it is;" don't you just want to take on the tone of an experienced, no-nonsense southern waitress? "Oh, hon..."

An open book? You may show us more about you than we'd like to know, but it's all still pretty superficial and selective. You may be forgetting that an open book only shows two pages at a time. And the next time someone schedules that inevitable news conference after the grievous deed or egregious remark, don't you want to be there, ready to interrupt them? So that when they say, "The people who know me..." you say, "didn't." Don't even let them finish the sentence.

There are a couple of things of which you can inform the person who says, "The people who know me understand that is not who I am."

1. Having to say that just means *those people* didn't know you all that well. 2. When you hear yourself making that excuse, the only person you are managing to fool is you." Each of us has a bit of the grifter in us, and usually the person most easily conned is the face in the mirror.

"To thine own self be true" is a noble sentiment, but Mr. Shakespeare, it is a challenge to be true to thine own self when we're not so sure who that is. So, if your self-knowledge is vulnerable to your own scam and your guardrails successfully deflect others from entering your interior life, does anyone actually know you?

It is a crazy question when you think about it, because perhaps the most fundamental human desire is to be known ... understood ... loved. How much angst, dysfunction, and brokenness in life is the product of our frustrated quest to be known, understood, loved? Everything from the tragic arc of Judy Garland's life to the manic public persona of Robin Williams to the roller coaster ride of Elton John's career to the abhorrent violence of Columbine to the earworm of the toddler's plea (*Look at me!*), can be traced back to the frustrations inherent in the quest to be known ... understood ... loved. So, are we destined to futility? Was the anarchist's muse, Alan Moore, speaking

truth when he said, "The horror is this: In the end, it is simply a picture of empty meaningless blackness. We are alone. There is nothing else."

Risking an unwelcome visit from one of his Watchmen or Extraordinary Gentlemen, I'd have to say, Mr. Moore, I disagree.

"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."

Even before we're bellowing at the midwife after delivery, that most fundamental desire has been met ... We are known ... We are understood ... We are loved ... and there is no circumstance, no dysfunction, no suffering, no pathology that can take that away from us.

"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."

Theologically, there are three \$20 words used to describe the God presented in this psalm: omniscient; omnipresent; and omnipotent. All knowing. Eternally present. Ultimate authority.

Omniscient. Omnipresent. Omnipotent. Volume upon volume upon has been written about what we mean when we speak of God. The great theologian Karl Barth once confessed, "I haven't even read everything I wrote." Folks like Whitney, Rebecca, Jessica, and I go off someplace for three or four years to read about what we mean when we speak of God, and we fail to scratch the surface of all that is written on the God topic.

God talk quickly becomes markedly academic and conceptual, making your brain feel like a runner's legs the morning after a marathon. Speaking to the revelation of God in Christ, Barth writes, "The divine capacity which operates and exhibits itself in that superiority and subordination is manifestly also God's capacity to bend

downwards, to attach Himself to another and this other to Himself, to be together with him. This takes place in that irreversible sequence, but in it is completely real." Any questions? :-)

It is easy to get lost in the lexicon of theology, forgetting what is most important when we speak of God. Omniscience, Omnipresence, Omnipotence. All knowing. Eternally present. Ultimate authority. Yes, these concepts can be discerned in the psalm, but what gives the psalm its power is that the conceptual is transformed into the personal. Yes, we can say that God is omniscient, all-knowing, but the psalmist reminds us that this also means that God knows you, understands you, gets you. Think about that. With God, you can never say you are misunderstood. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me ... you discern my thoughts from far away."

I spend a whole week wrestling with words so that maybe for at least twenty minutes, I'll reduce my average of being misunderstood. The rest of the time, I'm a mess. Mid-conversation, even small talk, I'll see in the eyes of others the same expression they'd have when watching a train wreck. But the psalmist reminds me, "Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely." That's

comforting to me. In the NT, Paul expresses the same sentiment, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

What a comfort that is. Like a genius with a Rubick's cube, God can unscramble my muddled thoughts to receive them whole.

If not for the word *like*, *you know* would be the most overused interjection in American speech, *you know?* We yearn for someone to know us, understand us, get us. We are constantly seeking that assurance. The psalmist reminds us that someone always does. It just so happens that someone is the Creator of the ends of the earth.

And here's the marvelous news, the One who knows us most fully, far better than we know ourselves, still chooses to be with us anyway. "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ... 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."

You are never alone. Never alone. Never alone. Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us. The apostle Paul declares, "nothing in all

creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Jesus said, "I will not leave you desolate, even to the close of the age."

The one who knows us most fully and loves us most completely will not let us go.

You know (haha), those cerebral, many-lettered theologians can turn your brain into a pretzel, but they also often find a way to bring something approaching clarity when daring to distill the divine. That same Karl Barth, who would regularly write a footnote that went on for fifty pages, also authored this most helpful insight on the immanence of our transcendent God.

"In [God's] free grace, God is for [us] in every respect; [God] surrounds [us] from all sides. [God] is [our] Lord who is before [us], above [us], after [us], and thence also with [us] in history, the locus of [our] existence. Despite [our] insignificance, God is with [us] ... Despite [our] sin, God is with [us], the One who was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world ... The victor in Christ is here and now present through God's Spirit, [our] strength, [our] companion, and comfort."

If asked to explain the baffling, troubling, irregular behavior or actions of others, knowing full well that somewhere someone is seeking the same explanation about me, I'll often throw up my hands, saying "Lord knows!" ... The Lord knows ... And chooses to stick with us anyway. Thanks be to God. Amen.