

## Sermon – July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023

### “Known”

When I was little, my mom did cross-stitch, and her home has many of her works of art on the walls. They are some of the most beautiful things I have ever seen, not only for the sheer beauty of their design or the colors or the frames, but because of the time she spent on them. The times when she would stitch them while waiting in the car pick up line for us in elementary school, the time when she would stitch them while sitting on the couch next to us watching a movie, the time when she would show us how she made a certain design or display immense humility as she laughed and pulled out thread that had somehow become tangled (probably because we were distracting her or because she let us sew a stitch). When she looks at them, she remembers the stitches, the difficult sections, the places she was when she was stitching, the troubles and triumphs. She knows those pieces of art so well because they are linked to her life. You can see it in the bottom righthand corner of these works: her initials are stitched along with the year she completed it. Those few stitches are the most important ones on the fabric because they note the time spent dedicated to a work of beauty, to a project that requires patience and perseverance, to something intricately stitched and wonderfully made. And when I reflect on her intentional devotion to her craft, Psalm 139 is often what comes next in my line of thinking.

Psalm 139 is a beautiful poem reflecting God’s all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful character. The author is praising God for this remarkable feat of being everywhere no matter how far they may travel, how distant they may become, how hard they may try to flee. They marvel, “If I go to heaven, you are there. If I lay down in Sheol,” the place of the dead, the place the Hebrew people saw as a place without action, without worship. Even there, God is with them. They go on to talk

of the “wings of the morning” and “the farthest limits of the sea”, which represents the sun dawning in the east and the sea to the west. No matter the direction, God is there. And even in darkness and light, there is still the overwhelming presence of God because darkness and light are nothing to God, nothing that can separate us from God.

The author is amazed by God’s tender care and creation, noting God’s intentional work, and I love the verbs used here: forming, knitting, hemming, intricately woven...just as my mom counts stitches and changes thread color so meticulously. It states, “You have searched me and known me...you know when I sit down and when I rise up...you are acquainted with all my ways.” It refers to a past knowledge and a present knowledge: God knows the poet’s past and how they operate in the present. Notice the verbs used are intentional, God does not passively know us but is actively searching, participating in our lives, forming and guiding us. God is not merely reading the headlines of our lives in a daily newspaper, but God is intimately acquainted with our actions, our thoughts, the words we speak, our usual way of doing things, our feelings and emotions, the ways we react and relate to others. God is part of it all because our lives are lived within the divine environment, we are surrounded and infiltrated by the holy.

One of the reasons it is such a lovely psalm is because it is all written in a relational way. The pronouns “I” and “you” are repeated and connected throughout the psalm in actions and proximity. There is no separation or distance in this psalm, though the writer goes to the extremes in explaining all the possibilities of places and circumstances, which in all likelihood would separate us from others who love us, but none of them stand a chance in separating us from the love of God and the status of being “known” by God. To make it even more personal, God’s hands are mentioned repeatedly: “you lay your hand upon me”, a sign of blessing;

“your hand shall lead me,” “your right hand shall hold me fast,” words of guidance and care. No matter the circumstance, distance, or time, the relationship endures. “I come to the end,” the psalmist says, and “I am still with you”...God’s love prevails.

Psalm 139 starts out with the author remembering that God has been present in the past, and the psalm ends with them asking God to continue to “search” and “know,” to find what is hurtful and sinful and to lead them in the right way, the “everlasting way.” It is a petition for God to continue this active knowing, this participation and work in the life of the psalmist, just as God has already done in the past and present.

Psalm 139 reminds us of the awe-inspiring presence of God and how we are fully known, but Romans 8 calls for us to remind ourselves of our identity. Those in the early church needed to be able to define themselves. In a place where emperors called themselves gods or sons of gods, the early church was counter cultural. Paul’s words of family and adoption were meaningful and gave them a distinct identity: children of the living God – those called to find their name and their hope in Christ. Though this passage in Romans is not as poetic as Psalm 139, it plays a very deserving counterpart to the Old Testament’s veritable psalm of devotion as Paul describes the identity of Christ’s followers, no matter their background, no matter their distance, no matter what. Just as surely as Psalm 139 declares the presence of God with us in all places, times, and stages of our life, Paul’s letter to the church in Rome defines how we are to live into that identity as children of God, following Christ and assured of the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Psalm 139 assures us that we are intricately connected to God and Paul reminds us of how that looks after the death and resurrection of Christ. His words

harken back to the psalm, reminding us that Christ has been to the place of the dead, Christ is seated in heaven, Christ's redeeming work removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. God's presence in Psalm 139 is seen in the life and death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. We are now part of the family of God, children of the living God, siblings with Christ, and this title is one that is shared beyond the walls of Israel, even to a place like Rome, even to a place like here.

There are few things that are as comforting as being "known" by someone. Sometimes it can be construed as boring or being predictable, but truly, I find it quite lovely. Like the fact that my husband finds it imperative that our birdfeeders are filled because he knows I love birds...even though I will probably drive him crazy noting the different birds that come into our yard or the fact that he may still joke about how I was distracted by ducks during his proposal. He knows my love for birds and he feeds that.

Like the fact that my boys will tell me good night on Saturday as I sit at my laptop, and ask me, "How's the sermon going?" or tell me "good luck with the sermon, mom". Because why else would mommy be on her laptop on a Saturday night? And then asking me first thing Sunday morning, "Did you finish it? I'm sure it's great, mom." They know how I stress and how I need that encouragement on a Sunday morning.

When those who know me show me care and love, compassion and encouragement, it helps me see myself in a new way. It helps me realize that I am lovable, that I have gifts, that I am needed. Their knowledge of me and love for me, day in and day out, help me see a vague reflection of what Psalm 139 and Romans 8 tell me that I am.

But, as wonderful as it is to be known, I also must know myself and my identity. I need to know my own limits: I need to remember that I need sleep, that I need to get outside for some fresh air and flowers and watch the birds in our yard so that I can recharge. I need to remember that I do not have to earn rest but that it is a necessary part of the process, no matter if I am caretaking, writing, working, or creating. I need to remember my strengths, my passions, and my gifts as well as the places where I feel weakest, the things I struggle with, and the spaces to learn more. Most importantly though, I need to remember that I am wonderfully made by a loving God, who seeks to be in relationship with me; I am redeemed by a caring Savior, who has suffered and triumphed; I am guided by a comforting Advocate, who breathes new life into me each day.

(This is not solely about me, and I hope you can all find yourself in these words.)

There are many ways that we are known in this world, by our likes and dislikes, our gifts and skills, our jobs and families, but there is a deeper understanding still that is only known by God. This deeper understanding is something that we will spend our lives trying to live into...that we are fully known and fully loved by God. That God has known and loved us through our past, knows us and loves us now in our present state of humanity, and will know and will love us in the future and throughout eternity. It is something we can put our hope in, something we can put our faith in. And how we live out that identity in the world is our calling to ministry, our vocation, and our world needs us to be the children of God here and now and in the future, because when we live that identity out, when we take our spiritual identity and flesh it out in our everyday lives, well, it just might be the reminder to someone else of their true identity. It just might be the mirror they need to see themselves for who they truly are. It may

help them discover, or re-discover, that their identity is intricately connected to their Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

May all of God's children see how they are so tenderly and fully known and yet still called beloved by our Triune God. Amen.