

Sermon: July 23, Proper 11, Yr A

To Know and Be Known as We Are Known by God

Last week, as also this week, we continue with Chapter 13 of Matthew. In this chapter we have a Jesus parable, where Jesus compares the kingdom of God to someone who sowed good seed in a field but whose enemy came later and sowed bad seed – a poisonous weed.

The owner of the field needs to decide what his best option is so that the least harm will be done to the germinating wheat seeds. The servants, who work the land, know full well from experience that it is best to pull the weeds out as early in the process as possible and to do this repeatedly in the growing season. That, we all understand, is the proper way to tend a grain field.

But this~ owner of the field goes against common wisdom. He instructs his workers to let the good seed and the poisonous seed grow together, allowing them even to entangle, instructing the workers to wait until harvest to separate the **wheat**-kernels from the **weed**-kernels. Doing so means distinguishing and separating plant **kernels**~ when the plants are a fully **mature**, at a stage that kernels appear almost **identical** – only varying slightly in size. The workers have no choice but to defer to the owner's demand.

The gist of the story, especially as it applies to Matthew's Jewish-Christian community, where there was much conflict, was for the church **not** to insist uprooting those considered nonconforming, those considered "bad seed." It was **not** to assume~ that it **could** correctly distinguish one from another.

The separating and distinguishing was not the work of the church leader or any of its members. In the end time, God would do the judging – God who knows hidden hearts and hidden motives. God who knows each better than each knows of itself.

The parable suggests that it is not our job to determine who is **within** and who is **beyond** God's attention. Rather, it is our job to imagine **everyone** as belonging to God, and, therefore, with all we can muster, we endeavor to embrace each other's ambiguity and to embrace the diverse ways God is working in each. ...I've heard it said that God uses crooked and curving lines to draw straight!

After trial and error, the church came to reflect the understanding of God working with the "good-bad" mixture marking our humanity. The church has come to recognize that as a community, we who seek to follow Jesus, saints and sinners, are a mixture. All – saints and sinners – are invited to seek to be as the Christ. We are accepted into the church as we are, a mixture of weed and wheat. This is so~ on the collective and the individual level – holy and unholy, potentially fruitful and potentially destructive. In church, we join together to increase our potential for holiness – encouraging, admonishing, redirecting, supporting.

On the individual level, too, we work on the mixture of good and bad, the wheat and weed in us. We seek to distinguish one from the other, to correct ourselves, and to model ourselves after Jesus. In that effort, we seek to know ourselves.

Surely you have felt the need to know yourself! To be able to explain yourself... **to**~ yourself. Perhaps you have wished to be known and understood as you **perceive** yourself to be~ – known in the best~ of lights! And, surely, at least once in your life, you have looked at yourself after a grossly wrong-headed thought or action, or after an unconscious knee-jerk reaction, showing up as an emotional outburst of anger, joy, or repulsion, and have exclaimed, “My god, where did that come from? ...I did not see that coming!” Perhaps, you felt the need of adding, “No, no, sorry, that really wasn’t me!”

Even in knowing ourselves there is **still** so much more to know and be surprised at, wondered about, disturbed by, and even awed by. There is still so much about us deep inside that remains hidden – even from us!

In the quest to understand self, to seek self-correction, and to have ethical guidance, the wise ancients and modern-day spiritual advisors **advise**~ our looking to what immediately lies behind~ as a guide to how best to move forward – as though being advised to look through an auto rear-view mirror to closely examine what we previously saw and experienced. Then, taking that as data to see more clearly, to choose more wisely. We evaluate the data – examining past signs, mis-turns, and experiences of being **on** course or **off** course. We retain that data to use in future navigation.

One such spiritual practice of looking back, practiced today, is that of the “**examen**,” a practice formulated by Ignatius of Loyola, a founder of a Catholic religious order. A simple introspective practice, done at the end of the day, the **examen**

involves prayerful reflection, over-viewing and examining the day's events, seeking to detect God's presence and to discern what was **in-line** or **not** in-line with God's purposes as that may be understood in light of Scripture, the teachings of Jesus, and the dictates of conscience.

In the Ignatian spiritual practice the examen process takes a five-step form:

First, we become aware of God's presence. Here we Look back on the events of the day in the company of the Holy Spirit. The day may seem confusing to us—a blur, a jumble, a muddle. We ask God to bring clarity and understanding.

Second, we review the day with gratitude. Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. We re-walk our day in the presence of God, noting the day's joys and delights. We focus on the day's gifts. Look at the work we did, the people we interacted with. ...What did we receive from or give these people? We pay attention to small things.

Third, we pay attention to our emotions. We detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. So, we reflect on the feelings we experienced during the day. Boredom? Elation? Resentment? Compassion? Anger? Sorry? ...What is God saying through these feelings? We consider ways that we fell short, making note of these failings and their implications. Does a feeling of frustration mean~, perhaps~, that God wants us to consider a new direction in some area of our work?

Fourth, we choose one feature of the day as the focal point of prayer. We ask the Holy Spirit to direct us to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve a feeling—positive or negative. It may be a significant encounter with another person or a vivid moment of pleasure or peace. Or it may be something that seems rather **insignificant**. We look at it... Pray about it..., allowing the prayer to arise spontaneously from our heart.

Fifth, we look toward tomorrow. We ask God to give us light for tomorrow's challenges. We pay attention to the feelings that surface as we survey what's coming up. ...Are we doubtful? Cheerful? Apprehensive? Full of delighted anticipation? ...We allow these feelings to turn into prayer. Seek God's guidance. Asking God for help and understanding. Praying for what may be needed.

Yes, we seek self-understanding. We wonder about the weeds in our lives. With Paul, we are challenged by being drawn to the evil we wish **not**~ to do while finding it **difficult** to do the **good**~ we **desire** to do, so we pray for God's help and support. Knowing what we **know**~ about ourselves may challenge a healthy self-acceptance.

For us, the Psalm 139 comes as a gift and a needed blessing! A blessing, especially, for those challenged by self-doubt and a lack of self-acceptance! What a blessing to know that God knows us completely, yet totally accepts us – as we are, and as we **can** be!

Psalm 139, as prayer, asks for nothing but for God to continue to search us, to know our heart and thoughts, and to test us. In

this prayer we reflect on the presence of God and the wonder, mystery, and miracle of being the subject of God's attention!

We are searched and known. Our God cuts through all our guises, pretences, and deceptions to see our true character – a God “from whom no secrets are hidden.” We are deeply comforted in knowing that we are surrounded by God's presence. In all our states of mind and conditions of life – in our heavens and hells, in our hidden and dead places, in the deepest recesses of heart and mind, in our joys and agonies, **God is present.** In times of darkness and of light, **God is present.** In our testing, in our falling and in our rising, ***in all our living and in all our dying, we belong to God! We belong to God!***

We are hemmed in by God – behind us and before us, God's hand is upon us. **We belong to God!** ...That is not frightening but comforting! Knowing that whatever state we are in – our moments of heaven and hell, **still**, we belong to God. ...God is here, now – bearing witness, luring, coaching, cajoling, enticing us toward the good, away from the evil.

So, we are left dazzled by the awareness that our lives are saturated with God! We are held in God's firm grip! In our evening examen, we seek to discern how God, **indeed~**, has been holding us that day! We pray: **Search** me! **Know** my heart! **Know** by thoughts! ...You have tested me this day...! How did I do? Where do I need to correct my course so that I am walking on the right path!

May you find comfort in the examen that Psalm 139 offers.
Amen!

References:

Examen – Full account of resources on the Examen.

<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>

How Can I Pray

<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/how-can-i-pray/>