

“Personal and Universal”

Anne Regina Berg Leavitt: I’ll probably remember her name for the rest of my life. I never met her, but our lives converged in a crucial way in 1974... when I officiated at her funeral, my first. The folks from the Clancy Funeral Home called across the street to the First Congregational Church of Branford, Connecticut, to inform us that a woman had died; and that although she didn’t attend a church she’d always kind of liked the look of ours and might have gone there if she had gotten around to it and would one of the ministers be willing to do her funeral. To Roger Manners, the Senior Minister, this sounded like as good an opportunity as any to begin to break in the new kid.

I had been to only one funeral in my life, and that was my mother’s. A subject such as how to conduct a funeral was far too practical for the great ethereal thinkers at Yale Divinity School. But Roger was very helpful, sharing with me the order of service he usually used and the pastoral prayer that is the basis of the prayer I *still* use at funerals.

Roger always started out with Psalm 139, and so do I: “O LORD, you have searched me and known me.” The words were only vaguely familiar to me all those years ago. But they have since become a part of the Bible within the Bible that I know not by head, but by heart. This psalm tells us something startling and wonderful: that God knows us better even than we know ourselves.

Think about this: we are born alone and we die alone. And in-between we make a lot of decisions about how intimately we will reveal ourselves to others, and how honestly we will look at ourselves. But through all of that drama and self-delusion, God knows the whole thing through and through. As Robert Frost once said, “We dance around the circle and suppose while the secret sits in the middle and knows.” We spend our lives on a quest for God; while God waits for us at home by the fireplace, hoping we’ll come by so that we can have an honest conversation.

My seminary teachers didn’t help me with funerals, but they did say some things that were memorable and enlightening. One of them, a Dutch Roman Catholic priest named Henri Nouwen, liked to say that, “What is most personal is most universal.” By that he meant that the more deeply we

delve into that inner part of ourselves that is uniquely us, the part we think nobody knows, the more we discover that we have in common with other people. “O LORD, you have searched me and known me.”

The fact that this text feels so personal is what makes universal. In commenting on the psalm Clint McCann writes, “... the psalmist’s assurance of being known by God and of belonging inseparably to God transcends the particular circumstances of the psalm’s origin. It has communicated good news to persons in all places and times.”¹ God knows us better even than we know ourselves.

But the psalmist seems to me to be a bit ambivalent about the whole business. “O LORD, you have searched me and known me.” This is presented not as a theoretical possibility, but as an accomplished reality. There is no pretense before God. God knows our actions: “You know when I sit down and when I rise up.” God knows our thinking: “You discern my thoughts from far away.” God knows our intentions: “You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.”

Is this a good thing? The psalmist writes, “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” Does that sound like an embrace, or like detention? As wonderful as this relationship is, it is not a relationship between equals. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.” Sometimes the truth about us is elusive; sometimes it is overwhelming.

“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” Obviously the author has thought about this. Is there a right to privacy with God? Sometimes being known through and through is a great source of comfort; sometimes it is a source of shame. Can we imagine any person knowing us this well? There is no moment when we are not with God. Ask the darkness to hide me and it’s not dark to God. Flee to the east or the west, to heaven or hell, and God is already there. “O LORD, you have searched me and known me,” whether I like it or not.

So whenever we meet or consider another person, the only thing we know for certain about him or her is this: that person is a child of God, completely known and infinitely precious. What’s most personal is most universal; and what’s most personal is being known and loved by God.

¹ McCann, J. Clinton. “Psalms” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IV*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, page 1235.

The implications of this startling awareness are both individual and social.

On an individual level, most of us carry around the idea that if only other people *really* knew us they would recoil in judgment. If people knew my mixed motives, my self-serving nature, my petty thoughts, how I am when I think nobody's watching, they would be appalled.

Funerals overflow with flowery praise, when the truth of who we are is always more complex, and that complexity often emerges at the gathering *after* the service. But God knows and loves the truth of who we are... all of it. That's what puts the "amazing" in *Amazing Grace*. The bad news is that, before God, you can't pretend. The good news is you don't have to.

Another implication is that if we want to connect with God we had better connect with ourselves. When God feels distant from us, it is not God who moved away. So much of what passes for religion is a lot of pious posturing; so much so that when folks are going through serious stuff they sometimes stay away from church because they find it too difficult to keep up the front that says that everything is OK.

But God doesn't just pronounce blessing on our unruffled respectability. God has searched us and known us. And the community of the church is a true spiritual home when we can come just as we are. And so we say it every week: "No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are always welcome here." You're welcome even if you're hurting, lost, fragile, uncertain, or deeply disappointed in yourself. Again to quote Robert Frost, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." That's what church should be.

The psalm also gives us a little glimpse of heaven, whatever we take that to be. I think the Apostle Paul is riffing on this psalm when he writes in the famous love chapter, I Corinthians 13, that one day we will be face to face with God. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, 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." Isn't that it? All our theology and all our psychology and all the self-awareness we can muster amounts to seeing in a mirror dimly. But one day we will see face to face, and one day we will understand just as we have been understood. No more guessing, no more games: we'll be home. That's heaven.

Another individual implication of this psalm is that with God there is always a new beginning. Love allows us to face the truth. Knowing we are

known, and knowing we can be forgiven, we can find our way to the honesty of confession. Frederick Buechner said that before we confess it, sin is the chasm between us and God. But when we acknowledge it, sin becomes the bridge.² And that reconnection is the foundation of a new beginning. God's love frees us to be self-revealing; our self-revealing creates a deeper connection to God's love. "O LORD, you have searched me and known me."

But that's just part of the story. God's knowledge and love of us have profound social implications as well, because whatever differences we have are transcended by what we have in common.

We are poised today at the beginning of a truly historic week in American history. Tomorrow is the holiday commemorating the life and ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Tuesday marks the inauguration of the first African-American President of the United States. When we think about dimensions of these events that are deeply personal and profoundly universal, we are drawn to a candid consideration of race relations in America.

An awareness of being known and loved by God can serve as the basis of a truly honest conversation about race; for we begin with the acknowledgement of our complicity in racism and our common need for forgiveness. We have not embodied the love we know in God. And this is as true for us as a society as it is for us as individuals.

The love of God calls us to structure society in a manner in which, to quote Dr. King, persons are judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Certainly many things have changed since King's day, as the election of an African-American president will testify. This is a wonderful statement about America's capacity for change. But does this election mean that, from the standpoint of social justice, we are living in a post-racial era? Hardly. Just consider for a moment that there are more African American men in prison than in college; that when it comes to education many children *are* being left behind and they are disproportionately children of color. While we have made some progress toward justice we have a long way to go.

More subtle are the personal dimensions of racism. Dr. King once remarked that 11:00 Sunday morning is the most racially segregated hour in America. On the whole black and white Christians still choose to worship separately. It's not that we are not welcome in one another's churches. It is

² I believe this comes from *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, from the entry on "sin."

that we continue to find comfort in sameness and familiarity and to be threatened by differences in all their dimensions. I recall a piece on NPR some years ago which observed that even people who work in racially integrated companies tend to stop off in racially exclusive bars on the way home. There is certainly something to be said for cherishing diversity in America and nurturing and preserving the cultural distinctiveness that connects us to our origins. But our faith reminds us that beneath all these differences is our common humanity. To the extent to which we retreat into enclaves of sameness to avoid acknowledging our oneness, we are denying the truth of how God made us.

Psalm 139 invites us each and all to come before God in honest confession of our shortcomings as a society and as individuals, and to acknowledge our oneness before God. And so the psalmist concludes, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Ann Regina Berg Leavitt... David Robert Ruhe... Martin Luther King, Jr., Barack Hussein Obama, each and every one of us: “O LORD, you have searched me and known me.”

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ
4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
(515) 255-3149
Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM
Fax: 515-255-8667
E-mail: druhe@plymouthchurch.com