

## Being Known and Loved

Psalm 139, Luke 14:25-33

A couple of years ago, Rodney and I vacationed in Titusville, FL. Even though he grew up in South FL during the time of the Apollo Space launches, he had never seen a space launch from the Cape. So, we had this trip planned so that we would arrive in time to see the launch of a Space-ex rocket and spend time at the Kennedy Space Center and the Cape Canaveral National Seashore. We made it in time to see the launch – amazing – as it rumbled upward and the sonic boom went past us. We spent the next day exploring the Cape and found some VERY interesting areas.

At the far end of the island, we found beaches that were so beautiful. There was nothing around them. The road was built on the west side of the skinny island that runs perpendicular to the coast and at the north end of the island there is nothing on the island but the road, the sand dunes and the beaches. It was so beautiful. We parked so we could walk a while. There were a few other cars but basically the place was deserted. As we walked across the dunes, we did notice that there were a few more people up ahead and that was fine. The closer we got to them, we realized that maybe we had stumbled upon something that was a bit different from what we expected. Still, we walked on.

As we neared the people, we realized that none of them had on any clothes. Without knowing it, we had stumbled upon a nude beach. We kind of looked at each other and kept walking...all the while getting a great lesson in social studies. There were people of all ages, gender, sizes, races, styles. There were no hesitations, limitations, inhibitions, nothing. And as we walked, being from the South as I am, I have to speak to people and say hello. My only problem was how to smile and acknowledge them without ...you know....looking, staring. So, I worked really hard to keep my expressions in check and keep looking forward or at the water. But, we came away with several things – one was a renewed appreciation for my own body – maybe I'm not as bad as I thought – but we also became more aware of our own hesitancy of being fully known. I like my clothes and yes, in ways I hide behind them. We all do. We hide behind clothes, smiles,

makeup, facades, quiet timidity, brash loudness, whatever will keep our true selves hidden a bit because it's safer that way. Those folks had courage to at least show their outward selves. Still, I wonder how covered they really are inwardly.

When Rodney and I first married, he gave me a kind of gift that really surprised me but one that let me relax even more in the protection of our relationship. Early on, I would always try so hard to look nice for him. It was important to me that I do so. I'm not really sure why. Did I want him to be proud he had married this girl? Did I want him to think I was somewhat attractive? Probably, the adverse was more true, I was afraid for him to see me without makeup and truly plain – gosh, what would he think then? Then, one day, he came into the room where I was putting on makeup and he was waiting for me as we prepared to go somewhere. He said, “why do you go to so much trouble?” I replied, saying something like “I want to look nice for you.” He looked at me and said, “I love you. Period. No matter how you look. Actually, I like it better when it is the real you without any of that stuff because then I see you, the person I love and married.” Well, from then on, I still put on makeup and such – you may not know it, but you are glad that I do – but not because I need to any longer. I do it only because I want to. I know that he, who among all who live on this earth, knows me best – warts and all – and in spite of my shortcomings, he loves me most.

In the Psalm passage read this morning, this is what we find even more completely. This Psalm is best understood as a prayer of lament by one who feels unjustly and falsely accused of infidelity to God. Through this psalm, the writer is stating his case that it cannot be because God knows him, and us, so intimately that there is nothing we can say, do, be, etc, that God doesn't know about it prior to it even entering our minds to do. God knows where we are at all times and what we even think about. He knows our inner selves because he is the creator of us. When we would build houses with families through Habitat for Humanity, the family's involvement in construction was not only a requirement, it was a necessity for their understanding and upkeep of the house. Due to their participation in the construction, they understood all the house's systems, how it was put together, how the plumbing and electrical worked and where the junctions were so that later on, when the inevitable problems would occur, they knew better how to address them, even though all they did was assist the master

craftsmen in the process of construction. How much more does God understand us when he was the master craftsman of you, me, us. God understands everything about us and who we are and can best be. Giving us these lives and bodies and emotions and psyches, he also gave us the freedom to use them as we choose. Unfortunately, we may not take care of them as we should and, like me, you may possibly cover them up with flowy clothing so as not to show to the world all the excess me I have accumulated. Even so, God loves me still. Even with my imperfections, I still am loved completely and thoroughly for all of my days on this earth and for all eternity. And this is God's promise and assurance.

One of the things studies have found is that if a person is loved and accepted for who they are and they are aware of that unconditional love, they are so much better able to function in a difficult world. I believe that is one of the main reasons that God gave to us this promise, to fill up ourselves so that we can go out and function as God's children of light. Even if the writer felt unjustly accused of infidelity to God, the way to disprove it is to live out the love one has experienced. As with all the other things that we are given, God does not give us something so that it can be hoarded up and kept to ourselves. We are given love, acceptance, assurance and wholeness so that we can be filled up and in turn share what we have received with others....knowing that we will always be refilled and refreshed anew so we can continue loving others. We will never go dry if we return to that ever-flowing fountain. We are told in 1 John 4:16 ff, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them. We love because he first loved us. Those who say "I love God" and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

Now, if you listened closely to the gospel passage read from Luke, you will have heard it read that if we are to follow Christ we are to "hate" one's own family and even one's own life if we are to truly follow Christ. This is not in contradiction to the passage from I John I quoted moments ago, even though it may sound like it. The key to understanding this teaching is the word "hate". It is a Semitic way of expressing detachment and the act of turning away from. It is not the emotion-filled word we use when we scream

“I hate you” in anger or rage. Were that the case, this lone verse would shatter all the teachings of God and Christ to love, to care for others, to understand, to forgive, especially one’s own family found throughout scripture. Hating one’s own life is also not a call to self-loathing, to throw one’s self across a doorway and beg the world to trample on us as though we are a doormat. Rather what Jesus is calling for is that those who follow Christ understand that loyalty to Christ can and will cause tensions within one’s self and between one’s self and those who we love. In such kinds of conflict of loyalties, Christ requires primary allegiance.

William Willimon, who is the retired Dean of Duke Chapel and Professor of Christian Ministry at Duke Divinity School, tells a story of a phone call he received one day from an irate father of a student. The father accused him of influencing his daughter to go on a Presbyterian mission to Haiti. “Isn’t that absurd!” he shouted. “She has a degree in mechanical engineering from Duke University and she wants to throw it all away digging foundations and building houses in Haiti. You’re responsible for this! He accused. The father went on to explain that Willimon had won his daughter’s respect and his sermons had influenced her to make this unorthodox decision.

Dr. Willimon asked the father if he weren’t the one who took her to church as child. The father replied that he had. Then, Dr. Willimon asked if he also took her to Sunday School so that she could learn about the way of Christ, and read the Bible to her? The father replied meekly that he had. “But all we ever wanted was for her to be a good Presbyterian,” he said. Dr. Willimon replied him, “She is that and more. She is a disciple.”

Following Christ is never to be an easy journey. The entire reason that Jesus started saying these things to the ones following him that day was that the group was there to “See what they could see”. There were usually signs and wonders performed by Jesus and they were following along to “see the show” as it unfolded. They were not followers, believers, disciples. They were onlookers and spectators. Jesus’ words to them are also meant for us. “whoever does not carry the cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple.” “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” These were weighty words stated in order to inform the crowd that watching and following along is NOT what makes

them a disciple. They could watch, in our day we would say “attend church services”, every day for the rest of their lives and it would not make them Christian and it would not be “following Christ.” Following Christ has a definite cost involved and he wanted them to be aware and know that they needed to consider that cost. “If you won’t pay the cost for the entire building, don’t lay the foundation” as the Luke passage said. In our day, there are way too many churches telling potential members to discount the cost. “It’s not hard to be a Christian,” they say. “Just worship when you can, give when you can what you can spare, and sign your name right here.” If we expect little, we receive little, Jesus says. We are told to count the cost, not discount it, because it will cost us everything precious to us.

So, the two questions Jesus’ parables ask us are: Do we have the resources to follow Christ? And, Will I commit fully to this purpose? Resources, yes, we have all that we need. We have been so very loved that our batteries, coffers, pitchers, barns, are all full and overflowing AND whenever they run low, our continued relationship and nearness to God keeps them full and ready for us to give away the love we have received. So, the question that is the bottom line is will I commit fully to and give up my possessions for this purpose?

Possessions is a word we easily think of as things we own but it is far more than that. It is also our pride, our position of authority, our status, our confidence in our own opinions and preferences, our relationships, our reputation, and a myriad of other similar things. Are we willing to give up those things if it would allow us to better show God’s love to all? That is a more personal and difficult question for us to ponder. What would happen if we did? It is not a requirement. It is an invitation. But as Jesus invites us into “followship,” you need to count the cost and decide if you are here to watch things happen, as the crowd in today’s passage, or are you willing to do whatever it takes to truly show God’s love to all? All. What if we did?

Over the last few years, this church has endured much turmoil. Every member has been wounded and scarred. Almost every one of you, at some time over the past few years left the church for a while – for some of you it was years, and I cannot imagine how painful that was, to bring you to that decision. But, there are also many of our members who are not with us today and haven’t been for months for pain and hurt they experienced. We

know that factions formed over this opinion or that opinion or even yet another opinion. Some will say it was about a person, some will say it was an event, even others will say it was an overall attitude. Hurtful things were done and said. Misunderstandings abound. Repentance and apologies may need to be offered but forgiveness is desperately needed all around. But all, every last person who has been a member here over the past few years, has been wounded and it affects us all and what we do. It is affecting our witness and our ability to move forward. While those of you here are experiencing a renewed spirit and growing excitement, there is still a fear and apprehension for the future because of unresolved pain and hurt from the past. We miss our friends and faith family members and while we try to take up the slack their leaving left us, it leaves a reminder of the pain. One thing was, and is, a constant. All of you here and those not here today, love this church and its fellowship. Because of your love for it, there was much emotion around all the decisions of it. You are working hard to keep this church alive and moving forward in the present time. At the first of this year, some of us even wondered if there would be a tomorrow for this church but you have proven that there is a bright future possible. But, while you were not here, there were other members who worked hard to keep this church alive and going then and they may not be here with us now. What if we went to them and said, "I know we had a difference of opinion, but I still love you and I hurt because you hurt. I know you love our church. I appreciate all you did for our church while I was gone from it and I want you to know that I am now working to keep it alive and strong and moving forward and will always keep the door open for you because this is still your church, too". You don't have to agree on how things were done, that is not a necessity at all. Your own words on the front of the bulletin state that. What we do agree on is that there is a definite, strong need for this church to not only exist but to thrive and grow. We need everyone working for the common good, following the Christ we say we believe in and being willing to make ourselves vulnerable, becoming more flexible, giving up our rigidity and showing the love we have ourselves received from God. What if we really did share God's love?