

TO BE KNOWN AND LOVED

Psalm 139: 1-18; John 1: 43-51

Do you have any secrets, secrets that you and you alone carry in your heart and soul? Wow, that's an uncomfortable question, isn't it? Depending on the depth of the relationships we have with others, how much we trust them and how much we are prepared to share with them, we divulge certain things about ourselves and we keep other things to ourselves. Why is that? Well, there are many reasons we keep things to ourselves, but one reason has to do with guilt, embarrassment or shame. What would happen if people knew certain things about us, things we have done, things that have been done to us, things that we have thought, said and felt, things that could be interpreted as betrayal, as morally questionable, foolish or degenerate? If we value the relationship, we choose what we share according to what we trust will build the relationship not tear it down. It is truly a gift when we do find people who will embrace us, love us and respect us even when difficult things are shared with them. But there is a limit to what any relationship can handle, no?

And even as there are some things about us we keep secret, there are also some things about us we don't understand. Why are we made as we are? Why do we have certain drives, certain passions, certain fears, certain things we detest and certain things that draw us? Maybe therapy can uncover some of that, especially as some of this begins to trouble us or bring trouble into our lives. But let's be honest, some things are a mystery and will remain a mystery. In fact, if we really dig deep, there are feelings and stirrings within us we don't even have language for let alone understand. We accept that we are as we are as uneasy as this may sometimes feel, and we keep certain things to ourselves because it's safer so to do.

One of the greatest minds and spirits of Christianity in the ancient world was a man named Augustine. Even as he was a church leader who wrote many books, the one book he is most famous for is simply called: *Confessions*. *Confessions* chronicles Augustine's personal inner journey. It's a biography and one of the earliest we have in the western world. Modern psychology would consider Augustine a pioneer of self-reflection in terms of the therapeutic journey. Augustine, however, writes his *Confessions* as a prayer to God. It's as if his whole life journey is presented to God. All those secrets, things that would be shameful, his ambitions and lusts, his mistakes and

passions, his conversion, his addictions and ongoing struggles, even as a bishop of the church... this is all laid out in his *Confessions*. And in case there are things in his subconscious he is not aware of or has no language for, he prays that God hold these things and forgive what needs forgiveness.

Wow! But you know, many criticized Augustine for sharing so openly. Many were scandalized that anyone, let alone a bishop of the church, would reveal his secrets so publicly, especially those things that are embarrassing. Why would Augustine do such a thing? Was he modelling something intentional in his behaviour? What kind of faith was he expressing that would see in such honest sharing and reflection a path to a deeper and richer fullness of life?

Well, Augustine was influenced by Psalm 139. "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 are acquainted with all my ways...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..." Basically, the Psalmist is saying that there is no place to hide from God. God is everywhere and God is in everything, and even the deepest, darkest secrets are known to God. Isn't that frightening? Isn't that terrifying? Isn't that a major invasion of privacy?

Well, this Psalm is attributed to David, and this is fascinating, because even though David was heralded the greatest of kings, he was also someone who made some huge mistakes. His relationships with family were awful, and he crossed the line morally speaking in different ways, ways that brought great shame, dishonour and grief into his life. Taking that as our context, this psalm is about being totally found out in all that is in us, all we are aware of and all we don't even have language for and is a mystery to us. God knows us in ways we can never know or understand ourselves... and yet, the experience of the psalmist is that beyond any shame, fear or judgement, what is felt is love. He/she/they are loved fully and completely despite it all. The language of this psalm is celebratory, liberating, full of thanksgiving and assurance: I come to the end – "I am still with you."

It's as if, the more you confess and come out, the more you feel how beautiful and rich it is that you are loved. The more you confess, reveal and name all that you are and entrust all that you may never know you are to a greater whole, you are liberated. A great weight is lifted from your shoulders, you are light as a feather and you can fly: "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.”

Now, neither the psalmist nor Augustine ever imagined that any other human being could bear the weight of all our secrets. No one can have that kind of love for us, can they? Yet imagine having the kind of faith that believes you are loved unconditionally by the ground of being and the creator of all, no matter what secrets you carry in you. You are totally known and totally loved. What difference could that make in your life?

Well, this leads us into our gospel reading. We are in the first days of Jesus’ public ministry, and one of the first things Jesus does is call disciples. The movement he is starting as messiah is not a solitary one. He’s looking for others to join him on the journey. But what qualities is he looking for? Well, there’s Nathaniel. And let me make a personal confession here. Every time I’ve read this passage (and between sermons and bible studies I’ve read this passage dozens of times), I’ve missed something crucial. Usually I’ve zeroed in on the beauty of what Jesus sees in Nathaniel’s heart and spirit: ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.’ Nathaniel is someone who is sincere, honest, ready to see things and name things as he sees them rather than pretending and being false. Nathaniel is an authentic seeker and Jesus loves him.

But is that it? I always thought so. But let’s go back a few verses. Nathaniel’s friend Philip has already joined Jesus and our passage begins with Philip seeking out Nathaniel. “Hey Nathaniel,” he tells him: ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ And what is Nathaniel’s response? ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Such a response betrays an elitism and a skepticism that also reveals a contempt for the backwater village town of Nazareth and anyone who comes from there. Maybe Nathaniel judges a person by their class or status or family lineage or race. Certainly, he wouldn’t be unique. Ancient Palestine like most any other nation would be structured very tightly around race, class, status and gender. People would be judged, honoured or rejected according to their moral standing and reputation.

But here’s the thing: Jesus sees past that. Jesus sees in Nathaniel something else past all that may be ugly in Nathaniel. Jesus has come to reveal and embody a whole other way of being a child of God. When he calls people he

chooses to see in them something beautiful, and it is his love for them that begins to transform them.

And this, my friends is a key quality about the love who is God compared to ordinary love as most people think of it. Usually, love is responsive. I love what to me is lovely. I love those who love me back. But God's love, as Jesus reveals and embodies it, is creative, recognizing loveliness beyond what may be unlovely or unresponsive. One of the best statements on this distinction comes from Martin Luther the Protestant Reformer who also happened to be a follower of Augustine. "Sinners are not loved because they are lovely" he states. "They are lovely because they are loved." Our being loved is what shapes us into lovely human beings.

Genuine love is the sun, rain and rich, hearty soil that grows the seed in us into a beautiful flower. It is genuine love that keeps tilling the soil, rooting out the weeds, adding water and radiating sunlight. Human love is often too weak for that, lacking inspiration. We love those who love us back and too often, the things about others that are irritating let alone ugly and awful are enough to fill us with revulsion and contempt toward them. Only a love inspired and grounded in a higher Spirit we call Holy Spirit can give us the kind of love that keeps reaching out and finding ways to see beauty in others past all the ugliness.

And it is this kind of love that moves past the unloveliness that can really transform people. Beauty is not simply in the eye of the beholder if the Holy Spirit is at work. True love, love that is creative sees beauty where others just see the ugliness. True love sees what is infinite in another, not all the dirt and scabs on wounds that have built layers over time.

I am motivated to be a better human being when I am loved. Those qualities people can see in me and love are those qualities that I am energized to develop and grow. Those things about me that are named, celebrated and treasured are those qualities that will shine more brightly. I can only be transformed as I am loved, and the richer and more durable the love, the greater the possibility of transformation.

Jesus sees pure gold in Nathaniel. He sees what Nathaniel was created to be. He is not dissuaded by Nathaniel's elitism, arrogance, contempt, classism, racism and more besides. Nathaniel the sinner is loved not because he's lovely. He is lovely because he is loved. His sincerity and authenticity of

being will grow with Jesus because he is loved by Jesus. His classism, arrogance and contempt will be chipped away because Jesus' love will drive him to purge those aspects of his character, making way for a growing beauty in his being.

And this, my friends, also brings it back to us? We are a cavern of secrets, a mystery to ourselves let alone others. Others may say they know us, but how much do they really know us? And would they really love us if they knew us fully, not only those sides of us we choose to reveal but those less savoury dimensions of our being we want to keep hidden from view? How could anyone love us in all our petty, pathetic, cowardly, depressive, arrogant, impatient, indifferent, apathetic and narcissistic aspects of our being?

What Psalm 139 and Augustine reveal is that we can only grow into beautiful human beings when we are loved. And the more things about us we expose to the sunlight of such love, the more we will heal, grow and blossom. What our gospel further reveals is that the ground of all being, embodied in Jesus, embraces us as infinitely beautiful and lovely past all our ugliness and mediocrity. Such love creates new pathways in us.

May we be granted such faith in God's inexhaustible, infinite love for us, and may such love transform not only how we see and love ourselves, but how we become the hands, feet and heart of divine love in the world, especially when we encounter ugliness in people around us.

Let us pray: Come to us, O Love divine, O Matchless Beauty... fill us with a faith that we are loved totally, in all of who we are and all of who we may yet become; Amen.