Randolph Church
9/4/22

Sarah Gallop

**Can We Know Ourselves as God Knows Us?**

Today’s Lectionary Selection: Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

*The Inescapable God*

*1O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
2You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
3You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*4Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.*

*5You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.*

*6Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*13For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

*14I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.*

*15My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

*16Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.*

*17How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!*

*18I try to count them - they are more than the sand;
I come to the end - I am still with you.*

Thank you, Sas.

When I’m getting ready to prepare a sermon, I look at the assigned lectionary readings to see if something strikes a chord in me – some topic that I’m wrestling with or a common societal theme that we might all be able to relate to. I don’t have the training to write about *any* given lectionary reading, as our fine ordained ministers do, so I just look to see if I can find personal synergies with one of the passages that maybe I could build on. I found that Psalm 139 did give me a jumping off point for today. I didn’t have a title in time for the early Labor Day Weekly deadline, so I’ll tell you now that I’ve entitled it “Can We Know Ourselves as God Knows Us?”

The passage asserts that God knows everything about us — our actions, thoughts, ways, and words. It tells us that God hems us in and lays her hands upon us — that God is always with us. The title of the psalm is The Inescapable God. Yikes? It’s interesting that today’s selection left out the middle part of the psalm where the psalmist literally asks God: “How can I get away from you?” ☺️

Now you may believe that God is omniscient, you may not believe it, or believe it somewhat — after all, we each take what we want and need from biblical teachings — and the idea of an all-knowing God may be comforting, scary, or inconsequential to you. For me, I think I believe it somewhat and find it to be both comforting and scary.

But what about us? Do *we* know ourselves like God apparently knows us? Do we know our *true* selves? Do we *show* our true selves?

In the Litany for the Human Family that we read together, we human beings are laid bare in terms of the emotions that we may naturally feel from time to time. The reading suggests that that we, the human family, may feel cynical, wary, selfish, resentful, stubborn, betrayed, angry, disgruntled, negative, pessimistic, hopeless, defeated, or disheartened at various points in our lives. Yowza, what a sobering list. My annual holiday letter certainly doesn’t let on that I feel any of those things ☺️.

But of course we do experience all of those emotions. We wouldn’t be alive or a part of a community if we didn’t. We are sentient beings which simply means that we have the ability to have both positive and negative experiences. Now, the positive experiences are pretty easy to deal with. Joy, happiness, contentment, love, awe, peace, bliss, wonder – wouldn’t it be something to dwell only among those feelings every moment of everyday lives? But that isn’t reality.

Imagine if we could combine God’s constant knowledge and support of us with a daily operating self-knowledge that is real and constructive. I say ‘real’ because of the holiday letter phenomenon – that desire to depict our lives in a carefree, perfect, yet superficial kind of way, and I say ‘constructive’ because we humans can be hard on ourselves when it comes to unpacking experiences and feelings.

I’d like to spend a little time on a concept that some of you may be familiar with – Welcoming Prayer. I hope you’ll bear with me. It’s something that helps me a lot and I want to share it with you.

Father Thomas Keating was the principal architect and teacher of Welcoming Prayer – and, really, of the Christian contemplative prayer movement. His work is definitely worth looking into if you’re interested in learning how to create a more personal relationship with God.

Welcoming Prayer is a method of inviting God’s presence into personal situations of emotional volatility. The conceptual framework for Welcoming Prayer centers around its relationship to the “false self” system (the holiday letter) and its role in the human condition.

The false self is artificial and idealized. It’s a defensive and superficial façade that can cause a lack of spontaneity and a sense of emptiness in us, hidden behind an appearance of being real. The true self is real and vulnerable. It’s a spontaneous experience that brings about authentic feelings of self-knowledge and of being truly alive. They’re psychological terms that you probably know.

Welcoming Prayer helps us to dismantle the false self and accept our difficult emotions rather than avoiding or suppressing them. It doesn’t encourage a passive embracing of a negative situation, but rather encourages acceptance of the natural bodily and emotional responses to it and thereby opens space for us to access God’s presence within. It’s a full acceptance of the content of the present moment. If we give a difficult experience over to God, the false self takes a back seat (at least for the moment) and the true self can be liberated.

So, how did we get a false self anyway? Our false self is forged by an overcompensating effort to (perhaps unconsciously) meet three primary human needs that become driving centers of motivation in our lives:

1. Survival & Security (housing, safety, stability, health, financial predictability)
2. Affection & Esteem (belonging, affirmation, respect, approval, regard)
3. Power & Control (being in charge, making the decisions, ensuring things are done “right”)

All humans desire these primary needs and Keating says that every negative emotion that we feel (anger, frustration, fear, hurt, betrayal, pain, disregard, sadness – and all those words in the Litany for the Human Family) is directly related to one or more of them. We can trace anything that we’re feeling at any time back to our desire to have these needs fulfilled. Making that connection and recognizing this through Welcoming Prayer can release us from the grip of our negative emotions, and remind us that our lives are meant to be about much more than just getting these needs met.

We can use Welcoming Prayer anytime we experience a charged emotion as a result of a certain situation. We can do it in the moment or in retrospect. We can be the victim, the perpetrator, or a bystander. Welcoming prayer is not an exercise in trying to analyze the source or dynamics of a situation, although sometimes that can become apparent.

We’re going to do this together, so I thought I’d share a personal example. It’s kind of a dumb story but I think it will help. Last week I had written something at work that I’m understood to be the ‘lead’ on. A close colleague said that she and two others were going to meet to review what I had written without me and then give me feedback. I felt that I should be included in that meeting so I could provide background and context as needed.

I was a little miffed and frustrated so I engaged in Welcoming Prayer. I said to myself when I noticed that I was miffed and frustrated: “Oh that’s right, you have a strong need for #2 - Affection & Esteem (probably belonging, affirmation, respect in this case) so you feel that you should rightly be at the meeting. And you have some need for Power & Control (probably to make sure it’s done ‘right’ in this case). I connected what I was feeling to my primary needs, laughed at myself, dismissed the emotions, and moved on.

Now that’s a rather trivial example but you get the picture.

Do you want to try it?

Let’s walk through it. Be patient – it does take some practice! Sit comfortably, rest your hands where they are comfortable, and close your eyes. Begin by thinking of a volatile situation. Bring the emotions that it causes into your mind.

1. **Notice** the charged emotion that you feel in the situation. Feel and sink into its sensation in your body (increased pulse, racing heart, tense muscles, reddened face, headache, shortness of breath). Don’t resist these bodily sensations.
2. **Welcome** those sensations, and in your mind, name the emotions that cause them (anger, frustration, fear, hurt, betrayal, pain, disregard, sadness). Welcome what you are feeling as an opportunity to consent to God’s presence within you. Say for instance: “Welcome anger and welcome fear, you are welcome here.”
3. Now, **Think** about which primary human need(s) is causing your emotion**. Release** the emotion by recognizing that it is directly related to one or more of your primary human needs. Say for instance: “I let go of my need for survival & security.” Or “I let go of my desire for affection & esteem.” Or “I let go of my need for power & control.” One (or more) of the three primary human needs will apply in any given context. You could also add “I let go of my desire to try to change this situation (this person, this person’s behavior or perceptions).” By doing this, you dis-identify with the emotion and realize that the emotion is not you, and that you are greater than your emotions. You can let go of both the emotion and your attachment to the primary need because you’ve recognized the direct connection between them.
4. **Rest** your bodyin a larger field of awareness (i.e. your more authentic and true self) and **respond** from a space of interior freedom. If you respond from this space, your next step in dealing with the situation will come from a place of trusting God within you, rather than from your false self.

Please open your eyes.

Now that may or may not have worked well for you but I encourage you to keep trying it. It’s a practice and a discipline. I’ll put some handouts in the back that you can take with you if you’d like.

Welcoming Prayer is a prayer of the soul. It heals the wounds of a lifetime by addressing them where they are stored — in the body. It’s a recognition that God is in all things. It says yes to charged emotions and is the quickest way to get back into the flow with God in order to keep our energy moving in a positive way.

Welcoming Prayer has an underlying attitude of surrender and is an opportunity to make choices free from of the false self system — responding, instead of reacting, to the present moment. It helps us to have compassion, rather than compulsion

Welcoming Prayer allows us to keep the hurt from setting in. It empowers us to take appropriate action as freely and lovingly as possible in any situation that presents itself in our lives. It is powerful in bringing about inner change and will deepen our relationship with God.

Finally, Welcoming Prayer, perhaps, gives us the opportunity to Know Ourselves as God Knows us.

I’d like to share a poem by the ancient poet Rumi

**“The Guest House”**

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.Bottom of Form

Amen

Please stand for our closing hymn # 21 Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

**Benediction**

God, we are grateful for your all-knowing presence — for shoring us up and hemming us in. We thank you for the ways that you inspire, mystify, and challenge us. We know that you are joined with us with us in our pursuit of self-knowledge, so that we can live more authentic, fulfilling, and spiritual lives. May we develop and strengthen this personal understanding in order to serve others and the world in the example of your son Jesus Christ.

Go in Peace.

Amen.