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Year A
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Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of eternal life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

KNOWLEDGE OF SELF, KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

PSALM 139:1-12, 23-24

Search me and know me: The prayer, prayed in the present tense, seems innocent and beautiful, and yet, in the Scriptures, it is prayed in the past tense, in a time and place where things unchangeable, set in stone. Now there may (or may not be) wisdom to know the difference between what can and cannot be changed. Notice that I am evoking the language of another prayer---the Serenity Prayer---which is prayed regularly at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, a prayer whose authorship is being questioned. If Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr did not write this prayer, which has been attributed to him for the past half century, shame on him (and shame on us for not examining the claim). Suppose he did not write the prayer. Does it change anything about the prayer? Absolutely not (though it may change how I regard the one whom many regard the greatest Protestant theologian that the US produced in the 20th century)!

O Lord, you have searched me and known me: This is an acknowledgement of what God has done and is capable of doing. The language implies that being searched and known is not optional; God just searched and knew, and the psalmist, while appreciative on the one hand, feels violated on the other: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down; you are acquainted with my

ways.” Translation: God, stop it! Stop following me; no, do not stop, because you have searched me and known me and still love me.

Love (uh, oh, this is a potentially volatile subject; love intensifies emotions, love causes hopes, dreams and fears to bubble to the surface). In this psalm, God---not any particular human being---is the subject of intimate knowledge, of extraordinary affection; the psalmist is its object. Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard, perhaps more than any other, has helped me to understand that love and knowledge are intimately related by emphasizing that love often follows knowledge. For Kierkegaard, it is difficult to know and not love. Half the arguments that human beings have with one another are based on ignorance and/or misunderstanding; the other half may be legitimate, and yet wisdom comes in discerning the difference.

The image of God in this psalm is frightening. God searches and knows (and it is unclear if God does this with or without permission; it appears as if God is one big snoop). God searches and knows, and then, after searching and knowing, discerns. God is situated somewhere between the brain and the tongue: “Even before a word is on the (psalmist’s) tongue,” the Lord knows it completely. If you are not yet creeped out by now, perhaps the poem’s next stanza will do it: “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” Is it just me? Or is the thought of being hemmed in behind and before scary? In both the Heidelberg Catechism and A Brief Statement of Faith, we affirm that we belong to God in life and in death; and while this is not any creepier than being hemmed in, behind and before, it feels less so, because the notion of belonging is more comforting than being searched and known or having hands laid upon us (even though that is precisely what the church does when one is ordained).

God’s grace is irresistible, and yet part of being human is resisting this grace (but, of course, to no avail). For Protestant Reformer John Calvin, knowledge of one’s self is centered in one’s knowledge of God. To pull away from God is to become estranged from one’s self, to let the best or worst in one’s

self become exaggerated, to be reduced to a comic strip when the God of all creation is looking to animate one's world with truth and love and clarity of vision and strength of purpose.

For the past week, I have been watching how the nation and the world are responding to *The New Yorker* magazine cover featuring Barack and Michelle Obama. The presidential candidate is dressed in traditional Muslim garb (complete with turban and sandals), and the would-be first lady is wearing battle-fatigues and has a semi-automatic weapon strapped to her back. A portrait of Osama bin Laden hangs over the mantle as an American flag burns in the fireplace. When first asked about *The New Yorker's* artist's doodling, Obama had no comment. Since then, both Obama and John McCain have acknowledged how absurd this story is. The question that I have been asking since the beginning is, "Who is being lampooned in this artwork?" Ostensibly, it is Obama, but given who subscribes to *The New Yorker*, it seems as if it is those who make false assumptions about the Obamas based on the color of their skin or the number of vowels in their last names. Who was it that said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free?" Oh, yeah, that was Jesus...

The problem, of course, is that sometimes the lies stick. I doubt that anybody at *The New Yorker* is out to ruin Obama's reputation. In fact, I suspect that the opposite is true: By publishing this absurdity, the powers that be at *The New Yorker* probably feel as if they are giving the nation an opportunity to confront lies about Obama and the truth about itself. Who knows how this will affect public perception of Obama or if it will impact the results of the November election? Maybe it will insulate Obama from further race and/or religion-based prejudice; maybe it will distract both Obama and McCain from political debate that would help the electorate to be even more informed when we step into the polling booth.

The only lies that are more corrosive---more damaging---than those that are told as part of smear campaigns are those that we tell ourselves. In the Scriptures, self-deception has been around since Adam and Eve, and the poet still wrestles with this problem in the Psalms. The human capacity for

self-deception is so strong that sometimes self-knowledge is not self-knowledge at all; it is God-knowledge. Self-knowledge is received, not earned; it is celebrated as a gift. The psalmist confesses: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high I cannot attain it." To strive for self-knowledge or love or grace is potentially self-defeating, and yet when we say things like, "Stop searching for self-knowledge or love or grace; let it find you," are we still not striving for self-knowledge or love or grace? We are simply adhering to a different strategy. When we let go and let God breathe life and love and direction into us, are we not acknowledging---affirming even---that such things are too wonderful for us; they are so high we cannot attain them? Where can we go from God's Spirit? Where can flee from God's presence? Nowhere! If we ascend to heaven, God is there. If we make our beds in Sheol, God is there. If we take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there God is with us. Why? Because even the darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day (apparently, this psalmist is morning glory as opposed to being a night owl).

The next time that you want know more about yourself, try moving. Try boxing up everything that you own (or bought on credit), and then unpack, reorganize and give away as much stuff as possible. You do not have to go to a different house in a different city to do this, but it helps. You find out what is important to you. You remember different phases that you passed through on your way to whoever you are and wherever you are now. Being completely unpacked and meticulously organized seems too wonderful, so high that you cannot attain it, at times, but God does not ask you know everything or do everything overnight, and so you take it one box at a time.

At the Festival of Homiletics that I attended in Minneapolis this spring, Columbia Theological Seminary professor emeritus Walter Brueggeman spoke at length on the subject of creeds: how they shape us; how we interpret them. During that lecture, he suggested that hymns function increasingly as creeds. Through them, God fashions the church into a people and the people into a church. Because music is involved, we remember them, and we sing them whenever it seems appropriate to do so, in our

sin and sadness, in our joy and laughter. Then he provided us with a case study. We went through “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” stanza by stanza, looking at what it says about God and what it says about us. We did not cross-reference Scripture or the confessions of the church. We simply meditated on who God is and on our longing for God, on the joy of heaven coming down to earth, on our hearts being set at liberty, on glorying in God’s perfect love and on ultimately being lost in wonder, love and praise. In the singing of this hymn, I felt searched and known, loved and empowered. It was a little scary, but strangely liberating, like this psalm, which I pray will be a song that your heart will sing now and always. Now to the Ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen.