

The Grace of Being Known

Psalm 139

July 20, 2008

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

Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

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
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limit of
the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand
shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light
Around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day
for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
You knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your 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.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them – they are more than sand;
I come to the end – I am still with you.

Amen.

I was never very good with grammar.

I remember in the eighth grade my teacher, Mrs. Green-Morehead was her name, sent me home with a “C” in Language Arts on my report card. I thought my life was over.

One of the things that often tripped me up was my tendency to use the passive voice. Why can’t the subject just receive the action? Seems simple enough to me.

If Mrs. Green-Morehead were in worship today she would not be happy with the title of my sermon: The Grace of Being Known. Assumed in the title is a subject, and that subject is you and me. The reason Mrs. Green-Morehead wouldn’t like it is because knowledge is something that we, the subject, receive – it is passive – instead of something that we actively seek.

It is not in our nature to be passive. It isn’t even allowed in our grammar! Ours is a culture of activity – of forward movement – of thinking ahead – and of making sense of the world in which we find ourselves. I don’t know about you – but many times all of that pressure to be active and stay active just makes me tired. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I long to be passive – even if it does go against the grain.

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“O, Lord, you have searched me and known me...such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high I cannot attain it.”

Many times we read this Psalm at funerals. I remember that this Psalm was read at the funeral of each of my grandmothers. The words are a comfort – but I wonder why we often wait to acknowledge their truth until the end of life?

This Psalm speaks not of our action – but of God’s. It speaks, not of our quest for knowledge – but of God’s knowledge of us. It speaks just as powerfully about our limitations as human beings as it does about the limitless capacity for God to love us and to know us in ways that we cannot understand.

What if we trusted these words – this wonderful theological affirmation of God’s majesty and our place as God’s fearfully and wonderfully made handiwork – what if we trusted these words enough to inform our living; and not simply comfort us in our dying?

What if we allowed ourselves to believe that the presence of God is not some end that we seek – some reward that we earn – but that God’s presence accompanies us on our journey in this world in every imaginable way: in our joy and our despair; in our proud and shameful moments; in our light and in our darkness? I think it would change the way we see the world; and I think it would provide a place to rest for a weary people who are constantly active and busy but who are unclear about what we really seek.

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Hang on a minute preacher. Don’t get pie in the sky on us. Don’t worry. I’ve got to tell you: As someone who is a busy person – I don’t take too kindly to people admonishing me to “slow down” and “stop working so hard.” I get a little defensive.

We are busy people. We are *too* busy. Our lives and our schedules are consumed with “things to do” – but the reality is that things need to be done!

Meetings at the office; soccer practice for the kids; taking care of aging parents; continuing to care for adult children; grocery shopping; mowing the yard; involvement in church; establishing yourself at work; networking with colleagues – it needs to be done. It takes time. It keeps us busy.

Add to this mix the need (perceived or not) to have and use technology that keeps us connected and in communication: cell phones, text messages, email, Facebook, and the like – and there is hardly room to breathe, much less rest.

This is our reality. Slowing down is a nice idea – but it doesn’t do much for people who live in the real world.

Even so, it would be nice if things were different.

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Here is what I believe: I believe that this cycle of busyness is a spiritual crisis. What makes it a *crisis* is that we don't seem to know how to avoid the problem. Life doesn't slow down, so how can we? What makes it a *spiritual* crisis is that we think *we* are in control of our lives, instead of acknowledging God as the author and giver of life – upon whom we depend.

Frankly, the spiritual crisis of busyness is growing more acute with each new generation. When I hear about stressed out four year olds (and their parents) who are testing to get into the right kindergarten, I shudder to think about what things will look like in the next ten or twenty years. What's next? Homework in preschool? Standardized testing for *Lamaze* classes?

Add it to the list of things to do (and worry about).

The question for us, and the question that is theologically interesting, is not “how can we slow down?” but instead “what is our motivation for staying busy?” There are of course, lots of answers to that question. One of them is simply that sometimes we go through chapters that are just busy. But there are other answers to the question of what motivates our busyness, and in my most honest moments two come to mind.

First – most of us believe that we are not good enough. We busy ourselves with our jobs, or raising our kids, or pleasing our parents or our spouses or our friends – many times for the sake of living up to expectations that we cannot possibly live up to. We do the same thing with God – always striving to be a better person, more faithful, less prideful, more perfect – because at our core we feel inadequate.

Have you felt this way? I sure have. Do you wear yourself out because you feel inadequate? Because you are running on the treadmill of meeting other people's expectations? Is this the motivation beneath your busyness?

Then listen again to the Psalmist and hear the grace of being loved just as you are:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
You knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*

Second – most of us also believe that staying busy and in the active voice will allow us to gain more knowledge. We thirst for knowledge, particularly us Presbyterians – for whom learning has been a hallmark – and, occasionally, an idol of our tradition.

In his seminal work, the teacher/theologian Parker Palmer argues that, historically, there are two primary motivations for learning: (1) our sense of curiosity and (2) our desire for control.¹

And so we busy ourselves with work, or making money, or education, or finding an edge on our colleagues, friends, or family for the sake of acquiring knowledge that will give us control; and we always want more because we can never have enough.

Have you felt this way? I sure have. Do you wear yourself out because you are haunted by the fact that you don't have enough knowledge or control? Is this the motivation beneath your busyness?

Then listen again to the Psalmist and hear the grace of knowing the limits God places upon us:

*How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them – they are more than the sand;
I come to the end – I am still with you.*

What makes busyness – and our culture of the active voice – a spiritual crisis is found in the harboring of both these motivations: a sense of inadequacy and a desire for control. The result is that our busy lives wear us out and leaves us empty.

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¹ Palmer, Parker, *To Know As We Are Known* (Harper Collins, New York, 1993) p. 7.

Early church father Augustine captured well our dilemma when he wrote: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”² Often, I think our Culture of The Frenetic Pace is really just a symptom of our restlessness and our deep hunger for the knowledge that we are known – and loved – by the God who created and saved us.

One of the reasons that the Psalms are beloved is because they represent the collective voice of the people of God; they capture our spiritual longings in poetry that remains accessible to us.

And so it is not hard for me to imagine that the person who sang today’s Psalm was one, like us, who had been restless for quite a while – much like a young child is when she cannot quite figure out what she wants: wiggling, crying, acting out –

Until, at last, the Father comes and wraps his arms around her and holds her tight; loving her until she calms down and rests in the knowledge that all will be well.

I imagine that today’s Psalm was sung from the safety of the Father’s embrace – by one who finally discovered, much like we will, that the desire to be known far outweighs the desire to know.

Let us pray: O Lord, you know us completely and you love us completely. And so grant us the peace and the freedom to search – not for approval or for control – but for ways that would have us to serve one another; resting in the knowledge that you are acquainted with all of our ways. We ask it in faith and in Jesus name. Amen.

² Augustine, *Confessions*