

“To Be Known By God” (A Lenten Sermon)

It is suggested that the reader first read Psalm 139 as a part of your reading of this sermon.

Rabindranath Tagore from “Gitanjali”

My king was unknown to me, therefore when he claimed his tribute
I was bold to think I would hide myself, leaving my debts unpaid.

I fled and fled behind my day’s work and my night’s dreams.

But his claim followed me at every breath I drew. This I came to
know that I am known to him and no place left which is mine.

Now I wish to lay my all before his feet, and gain the right to my
place in his kingdom.

“Am I a God close by,” says the Lord, “And not a God afar off? Can a
person hide himself in secret places and I shall not see him?” says the Lord. “Do
I not fill heaven and earth?” says the Lord.

It seems appropriate, at the beginning of Lent, to understand that we are known. And not only are we known, but we are exposed. Much of our energy is spent trying to hide – trying to find anonymity. “Thou knowest my down sitting and my up rising. Thou art acquainted with all, all my ways.” That is itself a religious experience. One of the most freeing things in life is not anonymity, but being known. Being known allows us to own ourselves in a new way. When you begin to realize that every thought, every action, every feeling is known by God; when you realize that there is no way for you to hide; when the consciousness dawns on you that the urgency that moves through life, in living concern about you, will never give you a place of hiding, then you have made a significant step toward understanding Life’s insistence on exposure. For all of Life knows you, and you are all of life’s urgings. You are not a disconnected phenomenon. Kahlil Gibran says it this way, “I went in my thirst to the fountain and I found that, as I began to drink the water, the water itself was thirsting and it drew me. It drank me

while I drank it.” The Black Spiritual says it yet another way: “There is no hiding place down here; I went to the rock to hide my face; the rock cried out, no hiding place; the rock cried out, ‘I’m burning, too.’”

If you recognize that all of your devious ways are known, that the poverty of your spirit is known, that the emptiness of your life is known, that even the quiet aches of your soul are known by God, then you might almost be prepared to speak a word of truth.

The consciousness that you are known is the primary ground of preparation for you to be able to speak the unpolluted Word. To understand that, “I’m not just loose here on my own, doing my own thing.” That is the essential primary ground of preparation to speak the unpolluted word. The Psalmist says, “If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there. If I make my bed in hell, Thou art there.” If I have a moment of free joy, call it heaven if you want to, God is there asking me: “What does this mean? What do you do about it?” If I attempt to get away by doing my ‘own thing’ and find the hellishness of the emptiness of my ‘own thing,’ God is there! When I get through fooling around in the slop of life with the swine, God is still there. The knowledge that I am known is relieving to me.

Oh, when I think about the incarnational mystery that brought me to this place, my arms and my fingers that now articulate with such normalcy, a mind that works, a voice that speaks, a body that breathes, and realize that at one time, it was an idea in the mind of God, I am embarrassed by such purpose! What more, oh God, is essential to get a people on the scent of Thy presence? What more is needed for us to lay claim on such a consciousness? Every replenishing breath I breathe tells me I am not only known, but owned. It is too much for me to think about. Thy thoughts about me are so vast and unending. How do I know? Because some of them float into my own consciousness, and I know they are not my thoughts alone. I see them in the face of another person. I know when I have wronged. I know that I am called upon to respond to

oppression with an increasing sense of the unity that is in me. How unending and unfathomable are Thy thoughts, oh God!

When I awake, I am still with Thee! A rest did come, and I attempt to find repose in Thee, to sleep and sleep, but the night is broken with agony. I awaken in the middle of the night with all kinds of urgencies flooding my brain, but they are not my thoughts. Often your best thoughts, your most critical thoughts about yourself come when biological realities have laid your sense of arrogance to rest for a few minutes, and you lay in that very strange zone where your body knows that it belongs to a stream of life that is beyond that which is controlled by your own thought process. It is in that moment, when the ego has its weakest hold on you, that you hear the voice of Life speaking to you. That is the Voice of God. How long shall you ignore Life's revelations?

They are the polluters who move without a sense of awe and wonder through this world. They are the wicked who reduce to cultural acceptability the essential writhing, urging surge in Life for fulfillment, for unity, for a sense of Oneness. They are the wicked, who deny their own responsibility for the Brokenness of the time. Good words, clever talk, sophistication devoid of commitment are therefore empty of Spirit. And our talk betrays the depth of our own experience! We know more than we tell!

"Do I not hate them who hate Thee?" Then the grand and climactic line: "I hate them with a perfect hatred." Perfect hatred, what in the world is that? I hate them because they did such and such. That is not what the Psalmist is talking about. So many people have taken that text and said, "I have a right to hate. It says so right here in the Bible." What is the difference between perfect hatred and imperfect hatred?

Imperfect hatred is a response to the negation of your own little scheme. It is a response to the interference of your little plan. "I hate you because you did something to me." Well, so what? He or she who does something to Life's own

will not be forgotten. Life knows it. It is not really my responsibility to get everything straightened out with everybody who has wronged me. I must be so caught up with trying to do the will of Life, fighting for justice and mercy, that I am not retarded by what happens to me. What happens to me, in the last analysis, is not critical. What I do for Life is critical. As you struggle for a new world, give your body, your mind, your energy, your money, whatever you have; give it to see that Life has a chance. You will find that the little scheme that comes out of your brain is not the ultimate answer. It does not solve the whole problem. If you find out that somebody has moved against you and has thwarted your plans, don't get upset. That is the way the demonic moves in on you, trying to frustrate your understanding of Life's claim on your life and energy. Try to find another way to keep moving. Don't waste too much time arguing with that force.

Job helps me in my understanding here. I don't have to fight

every little battle all the way through, because I know that if I have been on the case for God, for justice, for mercy, for love, for beauty, I have an avenger, an avenger who lives. "I know," says Job, "that my redeemer is alive." Do you believe it? Stop wasting your own little energy; get on, press on. Nothing happens outside of God's overarching concern.

Perfect hatred is hatred that understands that it is not its job to do the ultimate setting straight of the record with every little event and person. Perfect hatred releases the 'hatred' to the care of God's unending justice, mercy and love. Perfect hatred is a momentary response which gives way to the larger knowledge of God's ultimate governance.

Now, a little bit of awareness that God is intimately involved with me, could be a dangerous thought. Even though it might be the beginning of a step toward a new consciousness, it is such a powerful insight that it always runs the risk of becoming a new arrogance. That is the arrogance of the oppressor who says that he has God with him. The arrogance of the oppressor says, "I'm going to do what I'm going to do because I want to, and I know I am right."

I cannot say that. I say I think I see something. It becomes clearer to me that it is not enough to know that we are known. There is also the fact that I have

the freedom to thumb my nose at God. The very hallmark of my integrity is the freedom I have to choose to work for God's cause. The 139th Psalm opens with, "Thou hast searched me and known me." The end of the Psalm underscores the basic integrity of every person, when the Psalmist says, "Search me, oh God, and try me." There is a part of your searching and your need that cannot be complete until you release the hold on the hidden fortresses of your own self-interest. Until you harmonize with God's searching, you prevent the possibility of a fully resonant expression taking place. Search me, oh God, search me, oh God, and look at my heart, not my words. Try me after I have made my easy commitment statement. Try me, after I've said that I was going to do this or that. Try me and let all hell rain down on me; let people desert me; let friends and loved ones go astray; try me, oh Lord, and see my thoughts. Check me out and see whether I'm jiving. When you are tried, will you not think, "Oh Lord, why did this happen to me?" Try me and see if my thoughts are grand enough.

A whole society of people, trapped in their oppression, must be reminded that the evil is working to destroy their sense of grandeur about their purpose of being in the world: poor people, oppressed people around the world must understand that even under the burden of the struggle, they must not change their thoughts about the ultimate significance of their own creation.

Try me, oh God, and see what I'm thinking, and see if, perhaps some of the wrong in the world is hidden in me – reflected through me. See if there be any wicked way in me. But lead me also into the way that is everlasting.