

God Only Knows

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At the top of a beautiful hill in the middle of Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC stands a marble tomb holding the remains of several United States soldiers whose bodies were never identified.

The tomb is solemnly guarded, at all times, by a soldier meticulously marching 21 steps, back, and forth.

The face of the tomb bears this inscription:

“Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God.”

The Tomb of the Unknowns, as it is most commonly known, is then not a completely accurate name.

As the inscription acknowledges, even those unknown to us, are known to God.

No one is ever truly unknown.

For all, the lost and forgotten, those hidden away in prisons, or sleeping on the streets, even those whose identities have been robbed by the ravages of human warfare, all are known to God.

Perhaps the words of today’s Psalm are familiar to you.

This beautiful ode to a simple and profound truth. That God knows you. That the God of the whole cosmos, the God of all time, the God who made and sustains all that is...

That God also knows you. Not fleetingly. Not as a number. Or an entry in some vast database.

God knows you. Closely. Intimately. God is with us, near to us, always.

And more than that, there is no place we could flee from this presence if we wanted to. No height, no depth, no corner we could find to escape the presence of God.

“This knowledge” the Psalmist rightly says, “is too wonderful. I cannot grasp it.”

I get that. I have certainly known moments in my life when that closeness of God is a profound comfort. When I rejoice in being hemmed in by the divine embrace.

But the depth in which God knows our hearts, minds, and bodies, can leave us with another feeling too.

It can leave us feeling. Exposed.

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 my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

Sometimes the idea that there is nowhere we can flee from the presence of God, could feel distressing.

Because of course we have all done things, and said things, and harbored thoughts in our hearts, that we would be ashamed to have known by God.

And yet. God knows. Each of us. In our fullness. As we really are. Are known to God.

And even those things that are the sources of our greatest shame, do not make God love us any less, do not drive God even an inch away,

“This knowledge is too wonderful. I cannot grasp it.”

We are fully known. We are fully loved.

We are fully known. We are fully loved.

This may be the most transformative thing we could come to believe. That God really does know us. Including those things we hide away. Including those things struggle to distract ourselves from. Including those things we try to numb or ignore. Including those things we can scarcely admit to ourselves.

And that God really does love us. Not begrudgingly, but lavishly. Not Conditionally, but no matter what.

We are fully known. We are fully loved.

There has been a lot of talk about healing this week.

And I think that endeavoring to grasp this simple and transformative truth would go a long way toward aiding us in the work of healing.

Because often anger is a mask for our fear. And hatred is merely how we try to hide our shame. And Vengeance is just a crude form of grief.

And most of us are much more comfortable searching through the actions and inactions of others, questioning motivations, doubting intentions, suspecting the worse.

But often that looking everywhere else, is just a way to avoid looking within ourselves.

If we could embrace the truth that we are both, fully known by God, and fully love, then maybe we would be able to muster the courage to look into our own hearts to see what might be hurting or broken there.

Because any healing out here, that skips the healing in here, will not take us very far.

This mornings Psalm is the voice of a faithful one from the history of our faith who is striving to grasp the unimaginable truth that God knows him fully, and loves him just the same. That God knows the thoughts of his heart, and the words that are about to come out of this mouth, it was in fact God who knit him together, formed him.

And at the peak of this Psalm, he sings.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

If we turn our gaze only to other people and institutions, to organizations and social interactions, to government, even to church, looking for the work of healing to take place elsewhere, we will be disappointed again.

But if we can all begin by embracing God’s searching of our own hearts. If we can begin with the prayer of this Psalm. If we can open the book of our life not just to God, but to ourselves, with real honesty.

Then we can each ask God to heal the hurt in us, that has been hurting others.

This is not the end of healing. But it is its essential beginning.

So I suggest the words of this Psalm for your prayers this week. Psalm 139.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Or if a more meditative practice grounds your spiritual life, you could take space for quiet rest, perhaps even as you are falling asleep, and focus on your breath, inhale and say to your self “search me O god.” Exhale saying, “and know my heart.”

Let us all step forward into the work of healing together having attended to the healing of our hearts. Let us learn to deal kindly and honestly with one another by first learning how to deal kindly and honestly with ourselves.

We all carry something in our hearts, some hurt, some wound, or some scar.

Yet, even those things most deeply entombed in your heart bear these words.

“Known to God.”

And no matter how much your heart holds, you doubtless bears these words:

“Loved by God.”