

“Known”

Ps 139; Deut 1:5-18; Col 2:16-3:4;
Rom 7:14-25; Matt 7:7-13, 24-29

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“Know thyself.” “The unexamined life is not worth living.” These words have reverberated down across history. Supposedly Socrates said these, and I don’t know exactly how many years before Christ Socrates was, but the Greeks began to think about these things and in some ways have set them up for us as a question, a direction for us to spend our thought and time on. Know thyself. The unexamined life is not worth living.

In some ways we’ve done a little bit of that these last few Sundays. We’ve thought about our lives a little bit. We started out thinking about how we sometimes define our lives in relationship to what we do, and yet I think that our conversation suggested that for all the importance of what we do, it’s not all of who we are. We thought about the things of our lives, the physicality of our world and how we’re part of that. Maybe that’s how we define our lives, but we realized that it’s really more than that. We used that Greek word *psuché* to describe life or soul or ways of thinking about that. We began to think about who we are.

If we begin to really do that kind of examination, as we begin to think about ourselves, one of the things that I begin to discover is that I can see some successes. I also see a lot of failures. I see the struggles. And then I’m not sure exactly what to do. I feel perhaps a little bit like Moses in feeling the responsibilities of my life and not being sure how to carry them out. What did Moses do when he recognized that his responsibilities were becoming overwhelming? He acknowledged, “I cannot do it alone.” In his case, he needed the help of the people and of God to create this judiciary and that whole story. So one of the first places I end up is, I don’t see how I can do this alone. At least I have Moses there along with me recognizing we can’t do this all alone.

The other thing I was thinking about in knowing myself, I happened to have been reading a little bit recently and one of the books suggested that 95% of who I am is unconscious. There’s a lot to know that I don’t know. That question of knowing ourselves runs up against a reality that there is a lot of who we are that gets built up through our culture, our socialization, our genetics, our experiences, and we’re not even really conscious of it all. Have you ever had a reaction that you wish you hadn’t? Our feelings aren’t always under our control. They just come.

Know yourself. Maybe in some ways, that’s what life does. We get to know ourselves as we go along. We get to find out some of what we experienced. And sometimes we need to go back and check on what we experienced and try to figure out how it has influenced what we’re doing today.

But I don’t think we can really know ourselves, at least not completely. There is value in examining our lives, but part of that value is to run up against the realization that I’m human. I have failures. I need help. So what do we do? One thing we do is we start making rules. I know that I have to try to control that unconscious part of me—

sometimes it's called id, sometimes it's called worse things. We try to set up rules for ourselves. We say, "I'll never have another donut because I know it's not good for me." How does that go? That's a pretty trivial example, but I could go on. There are all kinds of things that are part of my life. I could say, "I'm going to get up at 5:00 every morning and do my devotions." Guess how that went? I have not achieved it yet. Just making the rule doesn't make it happen. The fascinating thing about the Good News Translation of Colossians is that it says, "Human rules and teachings have very little value in controlling human passions." When I read that, I was surprised, but that's how we do it, isn't it? We have our rules and teachings.

So how do we control ourselves? We look at Paul as a model and example. He'll show us exactly how it's done. "I do the things I do not want to do. The very good I want to do, I do evil instead." How many do's were in that Romans passage? I look at Paul and say, Wow! Even Paul doesn't seem to be able to do exactly what he thinks he should do. All his rules don't solve his problem. In fact, he comes to the end of it and kind of throws up his hands and says, "I'm in deep trouble." There were a lot of do's in there, right? So what does he do? He says, "Thank you, God, for Christ!"

So if we have trouble knowing ourselves, if we've got all this unconscious, it's really hard to know ourselves fully. And because of that, because we do try to set up rules, because we are in relationships, we end up going in ways that aren't very helpful and scripture has talked about sin, and we end up in bondage. Over the last 1,000 years at least, freedom has been central to who we want to be. We want to be free people. Rousseau said, "People are born free everywhere, yet everywhere in chains." We experience that bondage, that sense that we're not free, and yet we want to be free.

We realize as we try to look at who we are that we have limits on what we can do. It's hard to know all of who we are. You can't always make the decision that's going to be right. What do we do? Well, we can go to the One who knows us. We can't fully know ourselves, but there is One who knows us fully. Did you notice the beginning of the Psalm today? God knows us. God knows us fully, and it is out of knowing us that God comes to us. Sometimes we'll say of a friend, "They know us and they're still our friend." We can say of God that God knows us and not only is our friend, but sends us One to liberate us, a Messiah, to free us from this dead end we get into in trying to know ourselves and examining our lives and finding we can't find our way all by ourselves and that in fact, as I have examined my life, I realize how often I've gone off the path, that I'm in sin, that I feel the bondage, that I feel bound and not free.

Jesus says ask and knock and you shall find. It is God who comes to us with that invitation to come and see. We don't have to be afraid to come. God's not going to give us bad things. But we are invited to come and see what God will bring.

I want to step through that a little bit. There's one piece of it I want to hold up today. We know that God comes as Messiah, redeemer. We know that Jesus comes; we celebrate it at Christmas. We know that Jesus teaches; we do that all year long. We know that Jesus dies for our sins, there is a forgiveness that God is giving us; we celebrate that at Easter. Then there's this invitation to follow, to be in relationship with Christ. The reason I want to hold that up is because I think it is key.

I have a friend who teaches in the Berkley schools and has done a lot of research on how kids learn. He's a reading specialist, so he looks at all these different techniques for helping kids learn to read. He has looked at all kinds of things and he said there are certain techniques that can be used that are helpful, but the number one thing that helps a student learn is a positive relationship with their teacher or another adult who really cares about the learning they are doing.

What shapes our lives? I think it's the relationships we're in. We do a little bit of thinking about how we live, but that thinking is sometimes overwhelmed by the people we are with. Our relationships shape our lives, who we are.

God is offering us a relationship in Jesus Christ that will shape our lives, that helps us see ourselves as God might see us, that takes us from the dead-end we get to when we try to examine our lives to a new possibility, to a new life in Christ. We may not be able to know ourselves, but we can follow the one who knows us and his knowledge will allow us to walk on that narrow path and to find that freedom, and to build our lives on solid ground.

Sometimes it's hard to get past the struggles in our lives, yet as we turn to him, he allows us to see anew and change. It is our relationship with him that shapes us. We have the opportunity for Christ to give us a vision for who we are. The lyrics of a song we sometimes sing speaks to this:

All this pain. I wonder if I'll ever find my way;
I wonder if my life could really change at all?
All this earth. Could all that is lost ever be found;
Could a garden come up from this ground at all?

You make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of dust.
You make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of us.

All around hope is springing up from this old ground.
Out of chaos, life is being found in You.

You make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of dust.
You make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of us.

You make me new, You are making me new.
You make me new, You are making me new. (repeat)

You make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of dust.
You make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of us.

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Amen.