

Jon Hauerwas – May 8, 2016 – “To Be Known” – Mark 10:13-16 and Psalm 139

I have always had a deep and abiding respect for my mother. And, as I have progressed through life, I have come to understand that she, and that a lot of other women like her, have made some pretty incredible sacrifices in order to care for their children. Today, of course, is Mother’s Day. And as I reflect upon all of the ways that my own mother has positively impacted my life, I realize that she has cared for me no matter what.

This sounds like such a simple idea. But, let me tell you, many of us have put our mothers through some trials. In a future sermon, I will have to tell you about a time when I was in high school. My parents were out of town, and let’s just say that I took full advantage of the opportunity. Mothers deal with all sorts of discipline problems, and a lifetime of teaching moments.

But, even in those times when I knew that my own mother was disappointed in me for some of the decisions that I made, I never doubted either the depth or the sincerity of her affection. And for most of us, this is the way that we view our mothers. We know that they have seen many of the up’s and the down’s of our lives. They often know when we have messed up, whether we’ve told them or not. And we simply expect that they will forgive us. Because, after all, they are our mothers.

And that's what mothers do. They're in the business of offering guidance without judgment.

Well, all of this brings me to an important question for today. What do you suppose that it means to be known? What does it mean for someone to understand us, to know our quirks and our failures and to love us even still?

My mom loves to tell this story of me as a child. As she explains it, she once went into my room to clean things up. And, while she was doing this, she noticed something under my bed that caught her eye. So she inspected it a little bit closer. And, she found this large pile of empty, candy wrappers there.

I don't remember any of this. So I still maintain my innocence. But, my mom claims that without her knowing, I took a bag of candy out of the cupboard. It was one of those bags where everything inside is individually wrapped. And, with this loot in hand, I made my way to my room, where I hid under my bed, unwrapped all of the candy, and according to my mom, ate every last bit of it.

Now, my mom claims that I was definitely to blame, and that there is no way to point the finger at my brother. Because the empty wrappers underneath my bed

formed a perfect outline of my body. She says that it looked like one of those made-for-TV crime scene drawings where they use chalk to sketch the victim on the pavement.

If I am to be honest with you, I've battled these sugar cravings my entire life. So it's not too surprising, now that I am married, that my wife has also taken note of the issue. Several years ago, she even placed a bid at a silent auction for a nutritional consultation. And with the winning bid in hand, she presented this business card to me. And, she said, "Jon, this is for you. I want you to go and have a consultation with this dietician."

Just imagine my horror. At first, I resisted a little. And then, I dutifully took the business card. I took it and I hid it. I basically just buried it under a big pile of papers in my office. And, I kind of dusted my hands of it. And, I didn't really think about it again. Good riddance. Problem solved.

Well, a couple of months went by, until one day I was cleaning out my office, and I found the business card there. And, I remembered the promise that I had made to my wife. The promise that I would call this dietician. And, the guilt set in. So I picked up the phone to make an appointment.

And, right off the bat, I was given some instructions. My new dietician said, “Now, before I meet with you, I need you to keep a log of everything that you eat for three days.” And, I was silent. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” she said, “so don’t be embarrassed.”

And, even though she said that, that’s exactly the moment when you start thinking about all of those things that you know that you’re not supposed to eat. I started remembering nights gone by when, in the middle of the night, I had woken up to take the dog out, and had helped myself to a Snickers bar at 3am. But, you know, I probably didn’t have to put that on the log, did I? I mean, what she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her.

And, just as I was having that thought, my dietician made it clear that she had dealt with problem patients before. She said, “Now remember, when you’re keeping this log, I need you to be as accurate as possible. Record everything. And, keep track of what you eat on three, nonconsecutive days, one of which needs to be a weekend.” I sighed, and I made the appointment. Then, we finished our conversation, and that was it. I was charged with keeping this log. And meeting with this professional dietician, and putting all of my nutritional secrets out on the table.

At many points throughout our lives, we fear that we will be judged by others. And with this in mind, we hold back. Because we worry about being known completely, by God or anyone else. Our thinking here is simple. If someone else is acquainted with all of our ways, then we fear that they will size us up. And judge us. And call us to change.

Our second lesson this morning is from Psalm 139. The text says, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me... and are acquainted with all my ways.” The words here are meant to be comforting. And yet, this idea makes many of us uneasy. It’s sort of like when my dietician tells me to keep a log and then says, “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.” All I can think is “oh yes there is!”

And, it’s true isn’t it, that deep down, we all carry around a certain amount of embarrassment, or hurt, or even, shame? We lug around these concerns from various parts of our lives. Moments which become a part of our self image. And then, these concerns go on to impact either how we will or will not engage in meaningful relationships in the future.

In my Bible, Psalm 139 is entitled, “The Inescapable God.” The idea, of course, is that God knows us completely. But, the point here is not judgment. Instead,

the text is speaking of a God who shows concern for us. A God of compassion who is involved in our lives. A God who both walks and works alongside us. And finally, a God who loves us and who is willing to forgive us over and over again. Friends, if this is what we believe, then we need not worry about this idea that God knows us completely.

Let me give you another example. When I was a seminary student, I was working as a hospital chaplain in New York City. And, one day I entered a room and saw a woman lying there. At this point, all that I knew was her name and her diagnosis, which was malaria. So I introduced myself as the chaplain. And, in a heavy accent, she told me that she was a native of Nigeria.

Next, she went on to say that she had recently returned from visiting her family there. And, that on that trip, she had become very ill. Her condition was beginning to make sense to me, and I was starting to understand how all of the pieces were coming together.

She looked physically drained – even more so than the average patient that I greeted. And soon, I also realized that she was also struggling with her faith. And

that my visit was bringing this to the surface. She said, “Chaplain, I think that God might be punishing me for something.”

Instantly, I knew that this would be a significant conversation. I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “I think that God is punishing me by bringing this illness upon me. I think that God is mad at me, and that God is making me sick.” By this time, her voice was starting to crack, and she was beginning to shake. Something important was happening in that room. So I took a few seconds to gather my thoughts and let it all sink in.

And then, finally, I responded like this, saying what I truly believe. I said, “I don’t believe in a God like that. A God who is out to punish us.” Right away, she seemed encouraged by this response. I said, “I believe in a God who loves us. A God who loves you and who wants to take care of you. A God who wants what’s best for you.” And, at that point, her whole face began to tremble. “Good,” she said, as tears streamed down her face.

Clearly, this was a woman who needed to know that an inescapable God is not the same thing as a God of judgment. And that encounter reminds me of how many times either we, or our neighbors, have needed to hear these very same words

of reassurance. This knowledge that God can know us completely, and yet, love us just the same.

None of this, of course, means that we are off the hook. Earlier, I told you about preparing for that meeting with my dietician. And, in preparation for my meeting with her, I prepared my food journal. Next, I went into that meeting with the assumption that changes would be suggested regarding the way that I live my life. I assumed that she would probably encourage me to cut back on some of the sugar in my diet. And maybe, even ask me to forego some of my favorite foods.

But, deep down, I never felt that it was some big judgment of me. Because I believed that my dietician, this woman that I had never met – much like me and that malaria patient – simply wanted to help me out. And that she would use the framework of my life and my diet to help me live a better, healthier life.

And, friends, if this is true of a complete stranger, then how much greater is the care that God will show us? Of God, the Psalmist writes, “it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” And, “in your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.”

Even more than our mothers, God knows us completely and is acquainted with all of our ways. And yet, the point here is not judgment, but guidance. For through God, we are empowered to lead better, healthier lives. Lives of generosity and thanksgiving.

And, ultimately, we are brought to a place where we can respond to God's presence not with fear, but with gratitude, as we take note of God's unwavering care in our lives. And once we have done all of this, then we can face the call to change not as punishment but as improvement for our own sakes, and for the sake of this broken world.

On this Mother's Day, we come and we celebrate the special women in our lives. We thank them for welcoming us with arms wide open. And we thank them for the many ways that they have guided us and inspired us along the way. Because no matter what we say or what we do, and no matter what we leave undone, all of us are children. Just as we are children of God. Known completely, loved entirely, and guided throughout all of our days in search of a more excellent way. Thanks be to God. Amen.