

BETTER THAN YOU KNOW YOURSELF
Sermon for Epiphany 2: Jn 1:43-51, Ps. 139
LPC, 1/18/09

Have you ever had an experience like this: you are deeply concerned about something. You keep running it over and over in your mind. But you have work to do, so you suck up your feelings, put on a brave front and get on with your life. You fill all your obligations and congratulate yourself that you are so effective at hiding how upset you really are. Then you go home and there is your spouse or some other family member, or you get a phone call from your mother or some dear friend. And this person, whoever it is, takes one look at you or hears one word out of your mouth and immediately says, “What’s wrong?”

There are some people from whom you just can’t hide things. This can be unnerving and annoying, but more often than not, it is a great blessing to have a relationship with someone who “knows you better than you know yourself.” The interesting thing is, even though these people know you well enough to have your faults memorized along with your virtues, they tend to be people who love you anyway, and will stick with you even when you have unattractive feelings.

I was lucky (blessed) enough to have such a relationship with my priest and mentor in the 80’s and 90’s. Her name was Ellin Deese and in many ways she knew me better than I knew myself. For years I struggled with a nagging idea that I ought to be a priest, but was absolutely convinced that this could not be the case. Ellin was the one who saw the call was genuine, and who nurtured me through my wrestlings, until finally, in frustration that I still might not be getting it, told me, in so many words, that I should get off my butt and get my application in.

Ellin knew me well enough to recognize the signs of a genuine call to ordination. She also knew me well enough to know that I possessed a large capacity for setting up roadblocks for myself. And she cared enough both to listen to me and to speak up when I was off track.

Sometimes other people know us better than we know ourselves. This type of super-knowledge seems to be going on in Jesus’ call of Nathanael in today’s Gospel reading. Jesus greets Nathanael with a jocular reference to Nathanael’s skepticism. When asked how he knew about that skepticism, Jesus says that he saw Nathanael under the fig tree before Philip called him. In other words, somehow Jesus already knows Nathanael. He knows all about his cynical tendencies and he still wants him as a disciple. Jesus knows him better than he knows himself.

My friends, this is how we are known by God. God knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows all about our pettiness, our resistance, even our maliciousness. God knows when we think unkind things like, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” and still invites us to Godself.

It's hard to overstate how well God knows us. You may have heard it said, "God knows what you're going to say before you pray," but this goes beyond that. God understands all about us, even our murky motivations.

Many of us harbor a belief that we can keep secrets from God. Many of us have secret places, typically bad feelings, that so secretly disgust us that we even hide them from ourselves. Sorry, but God knows about those too.

I once heard a sermon which compared the human consciousness to a large Victorian house. The preacher then asked, if your life is a house, where are the doors you try to shut to God? The point of course is that no door is shut to God.

It is startling, if not downright scary, to be known better than we know ourselves. How dare another being intrude into our deepest, darkest thoughts? Yes it is terrifying to be thoroughly known by another. But being thoroughly known means that you always have a home.

My brother and sister and I live far from each other. We see each other once or twice a year. But when we are together it's like we have never been apart. There is so much background that doesn't have to be explained before we can relate to one another. We know each other so well, we can always pick up where we left off. As long as we have each other, we will have friends. We will belong. We will have a home.

As long as there is someone who knows you front-back-and-sideways, you have a friend, you belong, you have a home.

God knows you front-back-and-sideways, so guess what? You have a friend, you belong, you have a home.

That is the thought I'd like to leave you with. In support of that thought, I'd also like to suggest that Psalm 139 from today's lectionary be your meditation in the coming week: the song of a person realizing how thoroughly he is known by the almighty God:

Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.