

**Sunday, June 25, 2023**  
**Psalm 86:1-10, Matthew 10:24-39**  
**"To Be Known"**  
**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

Sometimes I think God has a super huge sense of humor, or whoever comes up with the lectionary passages for our Sunday's. Like this obscure scripture passage from the Gospel of Matthew. You know the last time I preached on this passage it was Father's Day! "I have come to set man against his father" – come on! But sometimes I feel like we skip over these more challenging passages, so here is my attempt to figure out this strange passage.

I start with this: Researchers have found that the human face has 80 so-called 'landmarks' – including the bridge and tip of the nose, the size of the mouth and eyes and the cheekbones. These landmarks are used in an increasingly important area of investigation called 'biometrics,' the process of identifying people by unique physical characteristics. For years, investigators have used fingerprints as a biometric, and of course DNA. And even identification by our retina or iris, called eye prints - is not just for James Bond anymore. And now we even have technology, phones and such, that are able to track a person's every move and maybe everyone we've come into contact with in the last few weeks?! Yikes! And what's the point of all this? In a word: safety.

But precise recognition is not something new, my friends, God has been making positive identifications for years. Forget eye prints or fingerprints or tracking devices, God knows how many hairs are on our heads - some of us having a few more than others, of course.

The truth is, we all want to be known, in our family, in our career, in our community, in our church, maybe not known by our DNA or eye prints or being tracked every minute, but to be recognized in some way, to be remembered. The comfort we have is that we are already known. For we are known by God. And in the end, that's all that really matters.

In today's scripture passage from Matthew, Jesus reminds his disciples, and us, that we are noticed. As one theologian states, "God simply cannot keep his eyes off us – but this is not because he's concerned about suspicious, seditious activity. No, it's because he loves us. God sees us, knows us and protects us . . . because [God] adores us. We are not doomed to be nameless, faceless souls, caught in the crushing grind of historical events or the anonymous oblivion of contemporary corporate culture. Instead, we are always going to be precious children of the Lord, created, redeemed and sustained in every difficult time and place by the Creator of all that exists." (1)

When Jesus first called his disciples, "Come, follow me," it was a simple call, a new job opportunity, if you will, and Jesus took them through a training period. They sat at his feet. They learned from him. They watched him perform miracles. They went with him from town to town, and they began to understand what this ministry that Jesus came to do was all about. But then something began to change. The disciples move from being those who sit with Jesus and learn from Jesus, to now being sent forth into the world.

Jesus sends them out to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, to be about the work of ministry. And he tells them, "This is serious work, and as you go out, I

need you to understand some things. You're going to go out, but don't think that life is going to be any different for you than it has been for me. The student is not greater than the teacher". Jesus tells them that he is sending them out like sheep into the midst of wolves and that they will most likely suffer persecution from the authorities, as well as from their own family members. By the time of the writing of this gospel, Christians were frequently estranged from their families because of their decision to follow Christ. Some could never return home again, treated as outcasts by those closest to them. They gave up every aspect of the home they had known.

Even today we all know of many people who are estranged from their families or worse, those who have been rejected by them, because of their beliefs, because of their lifestyle, because of who they are as human beings. We see this especially among our LGBTQ friends. Many, maybe even most, have been isolated or completely rejected by their biological families. And this has caused them to create a "chosen" family. A family of choice. And this is what Jesus meant here.

Jesus brings to us a different definition of family which goes beyond the bonds of blood and tradition. Think for a minute of who he accepted as his chosen family. Outcasts, women, children, the poor, the mentally ill, the lepers. He did this to expand our definition of what family is and can be.

And yet, hearing Jesus tell us on any day that he came to set father against son, mother against daughter and that we are to love him more than our own family, is a pretty hard concept for us to understand, to say the least! But Jesus' call for loyalty went beyond family love. Jesus said, I did not come to bring peace, no one said life was going to be fair, always bright and wonderful, but I came with the sword of truth, the sword of conflict at times and strife. A different kind of peace.

"Peacemaking", one pastor states, "is not AVOIDING CONFLICT. Running from a problem, pretending it doesn't exist, for being afraid to talk about it, is actually cowardice. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was never afraid of conflict. On occasion he PROVOKED it for the good of everyone. Sometimes we need to avoid conflict, sometimes we need to create it, and sometimes we need to resolve it. That's why we must pray for the Holy Spirit's continual guidance." (2)

Jesus doesn't pretend that there's nothing to worry about, but he doesn't let his disciple's dwell in or be crushed by their fear. Three times in this passage he tells the disciples not to be afraid – why should they be afraid? He has just told them that they are sheep in the midst of wolves, they will be flogged and arrested, betrayed by their own family members – why be afraid? So he builds a case for why they should not let this fear master them or hinder their witness.

First of all, he tells them, "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered." The hidden will be made known. The Lord will vindicate the faithful and will not permit evil to win. Even though Jesus was confident he would die, he had no doubt that there would be triumph. So Jesus tells his disciples - what I have told you in the dark, now go tell in the light, what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Go and do not be ashamed to speak and live as people of faith because all the secret, horrible, selfish, exploitive deals will be exposed and the kingdom will become visible and your work and witness will be seen in its rightful place, someday.

To be known as a disciple of Christ, we too must witness to the realm of God working within and around us, and at times, create conflict, expose unfairness, call for change, and endure opposition. That is what it means to take up a cross, to bring a sword. Whether it is in our fighting for a more just society, created on values of equality. Whether it is standing up for anyone regardless of religious beliefs, age, race, or sexual orientation. Whether its fighting for a better school system, voicing an opinion about gun violence, joining a protest, whether it's using a new holiday like Juneteenth to voice the on-going racial injustices in our country. Whatever our fight, whatever our cause, we will meet some opposition, some discomfort, some sacrifice. But God will be there with us and we must be assured that eventually, eventually, maybe not even in our lifetime; truth will be revealed, good will triumph, peace will abound, they'll know we are Christians by our actions, our values, our love.

We need not fear, because secondly, fear is the limited power of our opponents, for they can kill the body, but have no power over the soul. When we believe in God, God has power over eternity. The origin of the word psyche or soul comes from the ancient Greeks who noticed that there was something different from a dead and a living body – its breath, its life-force, its very self, that spirit we have been talking about all month – God life giving spirit within us. Life is more than just physical existence, life is more than just DNA or fingerprints, life is a body that can hurt and a soul that **no one** can touch.

Third, there is no reason to fear, because of God's compassionate love for everyone. Sparrows were the cheapest things that could be bought at the market in the time of Jesus, two for a penny, but Jesus says, even a sparrow is known to God. So we can live in confidence of God's precious love for us. Because God, who has provided for that little sparrow all that it needs for its full life, loves us even more. God's love is in that kind of detail. To recognize the ultimate power of the love and mercy of God, over against all other powers on earth is the place where we find new life in relationship with God and with each other. Our new family, created out of love for one another.

As one writes, "People are afraid of love because they are afraid of death. Yet it is only through love that an individual may truly become a person. When a [father or mother] loves a child, [when two people] love each other tenderly, or two friends love each other over a lifetime – this love expresses their infinite capacity to open themselves to another, something they know death cannot destroy." (3) A family bond like no other.

Many of you have loved, very deeply and completely but have suffered great loss. Some of you have lost a parent, some of you a spouse, some of you a child, and when you feel that kind of pain, real, deep, lifelong pain, it causes some to distance themselves from others, because love hurts too much. Loss is too painful. But if we don't love as God loves us, Jesus is saying, then it is as if we are dead. If we don't allow ourselves to become deeply involved with another person – child, parent, spouse, friend, our chosen family - then we won't feel the joy that can change our lives.

This weekend alone I conducted one burial and two memorial services, and I leave this next week to go to Ohio to bury my mom's ashes next to my father's. I think a lot these days about now being without any parents in my life. And it causes me to think about my own two children a lot and what they are learning from our family and their bigger family of choice. Teaching our children, all children, to life by grace alone, to be rooted and grounded in the love of God, is the best lesson we can teach them. But maybe, maybe more importantly, to allow

our children, all children, to live and love, to feel real pain and hurt, to fight for what they believe, to fail and make serious mistakes, to experience terrible sorrow loss, and allow them to live and develop their own faith. What has been said, I hope they “learn humility by being humiliated, that they learn honesty by being cheated, that they feel real pain and sorrow at a funeral and pure joy during the holidays, hard times, hard work and real happiness and true love.” (4)

But we live in a culture that promotes all kinds of ways to live a pain-free, trouble free life; a life of comfort and ease - take this pill, try this exercise, read this book - but in reality life is hard. I don't know one person - let me know if I'm wrong - but I don't know one person right now that isn't going through a lot. Jesus is telling the disciples, all of us, yes there are crosses but the cross of Christ you carry, means you are not alone, you are surrounded, you are held, you are part of a huge family of believers.

Because we know God our father, our mother, our parent, we enter into God's family and are changed in such a way that our former idea of family is transformed. Because we know God, we can live this new life with the strength and courage to live against this world and not be afraid. Because God knows us and loves us far greater and deeper than any cell phone or tracking device, we can surrender and die to self-ego, self-importance, my way or the highway, and search for God's way. Because we are known by God, every sparrow that falls, every hair that falls, is known, every single nose and eye and heart and act and word and embrace is known. Thanks be to God, for we are known and loved forever as children of the living God. Amen.

(1) Downs, Dr. Timothy. “Jesus Means Freedom.

(2) [www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com), Crime and Punishment.

(3) Nouwen, The Rev. Return, p. 122.

(4) Commentator Paul Harvey.