

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - September 8, 2019 - With Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

People long to be known. Otherwise, why would we put ourselves out there time and time again? Why would we bother to attend parties with strangers? Why would we carry on in relationships in which conflict is often present? And why would so many people seek connection on social media?

Now, granted, I do recognize that some people are searching for superficial connections. One might network only for business, for example. Or someone may introduce himself to his neighbors, not because he wants a real relationship with them, but because it would be nice if someone could collect his newspaper and push the garbage can to the street when he is out of town. But, to think that most people lack interest in connection that's any deeper than this is pretty cynical, isn't it?

Instead, most of us long for friendship, and with good reason. According to the Mayo Clinic, "friends prevent loneliness; increase your sense of belonging and purpose; boost your happiness and reduce your stress; improve your self-confidence and self-worth; help you cope with traumas, such as divorce, serious illness, and the

loss or the death of a loved one; and encourage you to change or avoid unhealthy lifestyle habits, such as excessive drinking or lack of exercise.”¹

Yes. To truly know someone is to have a relationship with them. It is to discern, to a lesser or greater degree, one’s trustworthiness. In most cases, this process begins by sharing small problems, tasks, or challenges with another and then evaluating the outcome. Before soldiers ever set foot on a battlefield, where they will put their lives in the hands of others, they will entrust one another in hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of small ways. And, in time, they are said to be a “unit,” symbolizing that many parts make one whole.

Or consider our own gathering this morning, which is entirely voluntary. Rather than making the effort to come to worship, you may have chosen to read a sermon online, instead. There are no shortage of options. With a few clicks, you could have paired that sermon with some beautiful, sacred music from any corner of the globe. Or you might have experienced an entire service, virtually, with coffee in hand, dressed in a bathrobe and slippers if that’s what you really wanted. But, oddly, you didn’t.

¹<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/friendships/art-20044860>. Accessed 9/4/19.

This morning, you chose to make yourself presentable. And you found a way to arrive at this place at the given time so that we could all experience this moment together. Why? Because there is joy to be found in community. There is joy in knowing and being known. And there is joy in our encounter with the living God.

But, if connection offers all of these benefits, then why are so many people afraid to be fully known? Perhaps, we are cautious because that kind of honesty makes us feel vulnerable. And, feeling vulnerable, we withdraw. There are individuals - I imagine that we could each name some now - who are incredibly slow to trust, for fear of being taken advantage of or of somehow being made to look like a fool.

These folks keep others at arm's length and are quick to sabotage relationships at the first sign that trust is forming. Perhaps, they never made meaningful connections as a child. Or, maybe, they experienced a terrible hurt. Whatever the reason, their main priority now is to make sure that it doesn't happen again. And by shutting others out, they hurt themselves by becoming the victims of their own, unresolved trauma. Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum are those who are too trusting. They easily give their heart to the wrong people, only to be disappointed or deceived time and time again.

The key, it seems, is in learning who to trust. As one psychologist notes, “by being the type of person who routinely criticizes others, you invite the company of people who are like you - critical and unforgiving - and turn away those who are generous and positive.”²

But, “when you offer genuine praise to others, you don’t just make them feel good, you also gain their trust.” Others recognize your authenticity, “which enhances their trust in you. This, in turn, makes them reveal more of themselves, including their insecurities, to you. In other words, mastering the art of complimenting, you trigger in others the tendency to expose their real - as opposed to their ‘public relations’ - self to you, which promotes reciprocity on your end, leading to authentic, deep and far more interesting conversations.”³

Today, I invite you to consider the kinds of conversations that you have with God. When you pray, are those dialogues mainly transactional? Are you willing to share only that you hope for the traffic to part so that you can get to work on time? Or are you more forthcoming with your insecurities, your hopes, and your dreams?

²<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sapient-nature/201207/the-art-complimenting-and-criticizing>.

Accessed on 9/4/19.

³ Complimenting.

If you believe that God is critical and punitive, then you are probably trying your best to avoid God's gaze, lest your actions be deemed inappropriate. But, if your view of God is loving and kind, then relationship is much easier and far more fulfilling. Trusting that God is with you, encouraging and supporting you every step of the way, then moments of correction become possible. It's like hearing from a good friend who reminds you to drink less or exercise more. You know that the comment is coming from the right place.

Scripture tells us that we are fully known by God. No faults are hidden. And yet, we are chosen, loved, and cherished nonetheless. As Paul reminds us, "there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." And so we come. Thanks be to God. Amen.