

To Know You Is to Love You
Sunday, April 28, 2024, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

Hear the Gospel according to Bobby Vinton
 (That's right ... we're reaching back in those stacks of wax)
 Hear the Gospel according to Bobby Vinton

To know, know, know you
 Is to love, love, love you

Just to see you smile
 Makes my life worthwhile

To know, know, know you
 Is to love, love, love you.
 And I do, and I do, yes I do

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It's interesting what moments get burned into my brain.

Most are what you would expect. Life changing moments like when my first child reached out and grabbed onto my pinky mere minutes after he was born.

Whenever I pass the front desk, I get a flash of sitting there the day we closed down the campus after Governor Newsom ordered those of us who had homes to go there because of COVID and not knowing when or if we would see each other again.

Whenever I'm in the chapel, I can hear Fang playing Gabriel's Oboe as we gathered to keep watch while Zelda Kennedy died.

And then there are moments that are more unexpected, until I dig a little deeper.

Like Valentine's Day, 1983.

I came home from school to find a card on my bed with my name on the envelope in my mom's handwriting. Inside was a card with Snoopy sitting on a hammock and the thought bubble above his head said "Valentine, to know you is to love you." And on the inside Snoopy on the same hammock surrounded with hearts thinking:

"I know you very much."

I can still see the card in my hand, and I can feel the two feelings that instantly intermingled and bubbled up inside me.

The first was that this was so sweet of my mom. This was her trying so hard to reach out to have a relationship with her 14 year old son. This was her showing me her heart ... and I believed that she loved me.

And ... the second feeling was even more powerful than the first. And it was a voice that echoed from deep inside me as soon as I read those words.

“Know me? You don’t know me at all.”

Now “14-year old feels misunderstood” is not exactly a news flash in any family in any generation, I wager. And that’s not a slam on 14 year olds. Part of how I parented my own children was every morning looking in the mirror and trying to remember how I felt at whatever age they were. I still do that. Not because they are feeling how I was feeling but because I know it’s important for me to be in touch with both who I am now and who I was then because I hope it makes me more empathetic and receptive to what they are going through.

And ... what was happening there was more than just stereotypical teen angst ... and dear God, please don’t hear that as trivializing that either. Because you couldn’t pay me to be 14 again. And God love those of you who are.

And ... what was happening was also about growing up in a family where we never had real conversations. Where we never let each other really get to know each other.

My parents were amazing. And like all of us they were creatures of the world they were raised in and both of them were raised in secretive, emotion-suppressing worlds. And they did the absolute best they could. And I know I didn’t make it any easier because I learned to do the same.

In our family, we didn’t talk. And I mean ever. It’s like we didn’t have the language to. And I’m sharing this because if this sounds even remotely like your family, I want you to know that you aren’t alone. And it’s not about fault.

I mean, my mom was raised at China Lake, back when it was a naval secret city in the middle of the Mojave desert. Her parents were functional alcoholics at a time when that was just seen as the way things were. My grandfather was helping design the Polaris missile and one time when mom was a little girl, a courier dropped off top secret designs at their quarters on base and being a child she took them out and put tracing paper over them and began to trace them and got yelled at severely by her dad when he got home and the courier got fired. She learned early on only to be the person others expected her to be. She learned early on not to ask questions and to keep up appearances. I would have, too. It was the way things were.

And yet it had a deep impact. We are all creations of family history. Not that we don’t have choice, we certainly do, and those choices are deeply affected by the worlds that shaped us.

She didn't know me, and I didn't know her because we didn't have the vocabulary. We didn't – either one of us – know how to bridge the divide of generations of carefully curating what we shared so as not to disturb expectations. We were both casualties of a cold war of silence and fear. Silence based in a fear that if we were known we wouldn't be accepted or loved. And so the risk of breaking the fragile *détente* was just too great to take the chance.

And she died without us ever really bridging that gap.

I remember when I was spending my nights in front of the Ferguson police department and provoking the ire of so many people, including many in my congregation, a good friend of mine asked me “why are you throwing yourself on this fire?” And the only answer I had was “because my friends are on that fire.”

And yet in the past 10 years as I've thought about that, there is an even deeper answer and that is that there is something in me that resonates with hearts that are not heard and understood. Something in me that no matter how minor my 14 year old pain was relative to the crises of others and the world still remembers how acute it felt to me ... and doesn't want anyone to feel that way.

I think that's one of the roots of my passions for centering the voices that are so often pushed aside and ignored. One of the quotes from Dr. King that resonates most deeply with me is “a riot is the language of the unheard” ... and that comes from a life not only of experiencing deep power and beauty from the pain of those who have been unheard but even from my vantage point as one of the most privileged people on the planet having that experience myself.

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God, I never listened to Bobby Vinton when I was growing up, and yet those words were my heart's desire ... and I am convinced that for many of us it still is.

To be known and to be loved.

To be able to be and become who we truly are and have that met with loving embrace and not the judgment we fear.

If only it were that easy. And of course, it's not.

So much about the world we live in tells us we need to carefully curate the pieces of ourselves we show. And we have become so expert at doing it through social media and every other aspect of our lives.

And as we watch others do it, as we ingest the carefully curated projections of other's lives, we can feel more and more like outsiders.

More and more like what we are really feeling and experiencing is not only outside the norm but somehow illegitimate.

That there is no possible way we can be fully known and fully loved ... so the smart thing to do is to settle for not being known and at least not being hated or rejected or cancelled.

It is some of the most toxic of our learned behavior. In his amazing novel Flight, Sherman Alexie's character Zits, a 15-year old Irish and First Nations orphan says of his own trauma history:

"I learned how to stop crying.
I learned how to hide inside of myself.
I learned how to be somebody else.
I learned how to be cold and numb."

How many of us can say the same?

How many of us even years later can say the same?

We learn well.

We learn much too well.

And it's has nothing to do with whether others have deeper trauma or harder lives than us. If that were true then somewhere on this planet there would be someone with the absolute worst life and that person would be the only person who could legitimately lament and the rest of us would be left to be grateful we weren't them. But that's not the way life works. For each of us, our own feelings of isolation, of exile, of being unknown or misunderstood are real. And need healing.

And far too often, we don't know where or if there is a safe place to turn.

And that's what this morning's Gospel is about.

What we got this morning was just the end of a conversation ... and I want to take just a moment and look at the whole conversation – because the reading doesn't really make much sense without it.

Jesus is at the well of Jacob, and a woman comes up to him, a Samaritan woman, someone with whom Jesus as a Jew should not be consorting. It was the sixth hour, the middle of the heat of the day ... which is not the time of day that women, who were tasked with this kind of hard labor would be doing this. So, she was there at a time where she thought she could go unnoticed and undisturbed.

And ... Jesus notices her. And they embark on the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in scripture Jesus and this woman that according to society's rules he should have nothing to do with.

And the conversation is amazing. First Jesus asks her to give her water ... something that you would ask a servant. And when she balks, Jesus tells her that he could give her living water, water that would make her never thirsty again ... and this changes the roles. Instead of Jesus being the master, he becomes the servant, and she is asking him for water.

That is the first step in knowing and being known ... being willing to trade places with the other. Being willing to encounter them so profoundly that their experience becomes as if it were yours and yours becomes as if it were theirs.

Then Jesus enquires about her husband, and she says "I have no husband" and Jesus says to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband' for you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true."

What Jesus is revealing is probably a source of great shame for her, and yet Jesus does not approach it with judgment. He is just stating the facts of her life. There are many reasons she could have had many husbands, most of which were about how deeply vulnerable women were and how without the economic and physical protection of a husband they were liable to poverty and even death.

What Jesus is doing here is meeting this courageous woman right where she is ... in the most profound vulnerability she has.

She has so much to fear. She has certainly been rejected before otherwise she would not be at the well in the heat of the day. And yet she and Jesus are meeting in this place of vulnerability that could be a place of great cost for her.

Now conventional wisdom, both then and now, would be for her to deny. To in the words of Roger Stone:

"Admit nothing. Deny everything. Launch a counterattack."

That is the wisdom of the world. And that's not what she does. Instead, she allows Jesus to encounter her in that place. She allows herself, no matter what her fear of her truth being revealed, not to act out of that fear. She allows Jesus to meet her, and she allows herself to meet Jesus.

And it becomes an experience of worship. And that is where we get this morning's Gospel reading. Jesus says: "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Creator in Spirit and truth, for the Creator seeks such as these to worship her. God is Spirit and those who worship God must worship in Spirit and truth."

Now a couple things about this. First, the words spirit and truth. Spirit is pneuma ... literally breath from deep inside us .. and truth is, well, truth. True worship is sharing who we are from the depth of our being. It is not carefully curating that which we share with God and each other. It is putting it all on the table.

And then there is that word worship. In Greek, the word is προσκυνέω (Pros – key – nay – oh) – and the closest translation is like a dog licking your face. It is pure love. Nothing else. The way we love God most purely and deeply, the way a dog licks our face, is just to be honest about who we are.

That's what God desires ... that what God longs for from each of us and for us from each other. Can we meet in that place of deepest vulnerability. That place where we most profoundly fear we will be judged and instead be embraced and trust that we belong.

Can we share the most tender and vulnerable parts of ourselves?

Can we meet in that place where we can just share what's on our hearts even ... or even especially if the judgment we are risking is terrifying.

Too often, the answer is no.

Too often, we feel like my 14-year old self did reading that card, maybe even believing or struggling to believe that the other actually does love us but still unable to share ourselves because we are not convinced we will be accepted or that the love is not conditional.

And yet the truth of this Gospel and the truth of our lives is that is the only way forward.

It is meeting in that place of mutual vulnerability.

Meeting in that place where we allow the very different experiences of our lives, where we allow the absolute complex messiness of life itself to come out into the open and not be neatly simplified but wrestle with the complexity and love one another through it.

In fact, the location of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman is a part of this story because it's called Jacob's well ... and Jacob would never have made it to Shechem if he hadn't wrestled with God at the ford of the Jabbok river and was changed by the encounter on the way.

That's the way forward. To wrestle together in deep vulnerability. To not hold back speaking our truths and also to not hold back in listening to each other. To not hold back in empathizing with one another. To seek to know each other as deeply as we long to be known. Because to know us all is to love us. Or at least the beginning.

I am not a child anymore ... though I still feel like one a lot ... I am a parent. And this week one of my children was arrested for participating in a pro-Palestinian encampment on his college campus. And I am prouder of him than I can say ... and I would have also been proud of him if he had decided not to participate because that's the nature of love.

Many of you know that we have a dear friend in Rabbi Ken Chasen of Leo Baeck Temple ... and since October 7 we have leaned into that friendship with the kind of truth telling that I believe is what Jesus is calling us to as the road to all of our liberation. As Ken found out about my child's arrest on campus, he reached out in compassion and love ... and then he shared this with me:

"I have a child at a Boston-area college too. She is presently hoping to make it to the end of her semester safely, while not getting identified as a Jew at any campus protest like the one Hayden attended.

"My daughter takes lengthy, out-of-the-way routes to her classes and other activities, just to make sure she does not invite danger. The Jewish parents group at her university is begging the administration to enforce its rules about peaceful assembly. So far, things have remained peaceful. This has not been the good fortune met by the daughter of my closest rabbi friend, who goes to Columbia. She came home for Passover Seder with her family and is not returning to school for the remainder of the semester, after Jewish professional leaders on their campus urged Jewish students to stay at home until the campus could be made safe again for Jews."

Ken's daughter's narrative and my son's narrative don't fit neatly together. I wish they did. There are certainly people using the pro-Palestinian protests as cover for anti-semitism just as there are people using pro-Israeli demonstrations as cover for islamophobia.

And ... at the center of it for the two of us is two parents who love and are worried about our children. Two parents whose children have never met, who if they did would probably be friends, and could potentially find themselves on opposite sides of a conflict even though they both have hearts for love and justice.

How do we navigate this? It can't be just about coming to a point of agreement because too often there isn't one.

It can't be just about deciding who is right and who is wrong because we are both right and we are both wrong.

It can't just be about deciding who has the greater grievance, who has suffered the most, who has the most misery on their CV .. because even the ones who come up short in that calculus have wounds that need healing lest they become the fuel for future wounding.

All I can offer is that it has to be about Jesus and that woman at the well. It has to be about having the courage to meet each other in that place of vulnerability. It has to be about trying to know each other as much as possible because one thing I can tell you about my relationship with Ken besides that it has been a deep struggle these past six plus months is that I have grown in deep love for him precisely because he has had the courage to show me his heart.

Because that's the thing about we humans .. to know us is to love us.

Jesus said, "love your neighbor." And I'm thinking he might have skipped a step. Maybe he first should have said "know your neighbor." Because the loving comes with the knowing.

I know many of you have struggled with me and we have struggled together. And that's OK. And please know that I want to know you ...and I will always try to let you into my life and let you see who I am and that is my deep desire for you to do with me and with each other because that's the model Christ gives us and it's a good one.

Because no matter how many walls we have built up over our long lives, we still are knowable and we are so, so loveable. Each and every one of us.

To know you is to love you.

And I do.

And God does.

And I trust that you do, too.

Amen.