

A New Creed: Part VIII

Rev. Dr. Dale Skinner

What if your every action, every word, every thought, every potential thought, was known by another? Is the possibility of being fully known something you would welcome or resist? If your partner, spouse, close friend knew everything about you, would it help or hurt your relationship? If you knew everything about yourself, were fully aware of all that makes up who you are, would you be the better for it or not? Socrates famously said, "Know thyself." But you know, it's one thing to know thyself, and another thing to have thyself known.

The question of whether or not we actually want to know ourselves and be known is difficult to answer. An example of the complexity of this is an ongoing project called Post Secret, started by a fellow named Frank Warren in the U.S. For the past number of years people from all around the world have been writing their secrets they've never told anyone else on a postcard and mailing them to Mr. Warren. It's encouraged that the picture on the postcard have some relationship to the secret being revealed. The sender is to be anonymous, and Warren collects these postcards, posts them on his website, postsecret.com. To date the website has had over 750 million visits and posts pictures and secrets from different peoples, countries, and languages.

What started as an experiment on a blog, in 2005, has turned out to be a calling for Warren. He has written numerous books about the project, including a book called PostSecret Confessions on Life, Death, and God. He has even been called, "America's most trusted stranger." The one people trust with their secrets.

What kind of secrets do people share on Post Secret? Here are some of the ones I read, such as:

"I don't remember delivering my high school valedictorian speech because I was addicted to Xanax."

And, "I hate having the same birthday as my mother-in-law."

Or, "I ate all the food you left in the company fridge after you got fired."

And this one, “I’m an agnostic, but reading scripture gives me comfort. I’m afraid of being a hypocrite.”

I suppose one way of looking at this phenomenon of Post Secret is that it indulges our more voyeuristic tendencies and desire for juicy gossip while keeping us anonymous strangers to one another. Everyone gets to be let in on other people’s secrets without any real exchange of relational trust.

But you know, another way of looking at it is that it addresses an unmet need that people have to be heard. People who need to get something off of their chests and be honest with themselves and the world. Has Frank Warren succeeded where the church has sometimes fallen short? Providing a non-threatening and non-judgmental space for people to reveal some of the deepest and most difficult aspects of who they are? A confessional for the 21st century? A place to bring into the light what has been kept hidden? To be free? To be known?

Wanting to be known, to be understood and unconditionally accepted is a deep human need. The apostle Paul speaks to it in his First Letter to the Corinthians when says, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” It is the hope of being fully known and still know the love of God.

I suspect if we were to ask the author of Psalm 139 if he wanted to be known, he would have said Yes! He would have said, in fact, in God’s eyes, I am already known. But, again, at different points it’s not all together clear the writer entirely means it...or if the Psalmist always felt that way.

The Psalm begins, “O Lord, you have searched me and know me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.” It is a prayer of a reflective individual to an all-encompassing Divine presence that is intimately familiar with the human being. Along with searching us and knowing us, there’s this sense in which The Great Source of Life knows me better than I know myself.

There can be great comfort in being known better than we can know ourselves. Because it doesn’t take a whole lot of self-reflection to conclude that we don’t know ourselves all that well sometimes. We don’t know why we think what we think, why we do what we do,

say what we say. Do we really know where these desires within us come from? What combination of ancient ancestors are linked together in our DNA, giving us certain tendencies and certain physical gifts and limitations? What forces and powers in the world play on our subconscious and cause us to make certain decisions and seek different ends for ourselves?

Thomas Merton, someone who took plenty of time for solitude and self-reflection, echoes this unknowing in a prayer he wrote. He said,

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.”

That is a humble and surprising statement from a monk who, we might think, if anyone is supposed to have this figured out, it might be someone in that line of work. Yet maybe he realized what many haven't taken the time to meditate upon...and that is how we may think we have it all figured out and know exactly who we are and where we are going, when maybe we don't. There is actually so much we and others don't know and will never know and cannot perceive, let alone control.

This Psalm that Jamie read for us has traditionally been understood as a Psalm of praise from an individual seeking refuge from false accusers. The Psalmist cries out to God who knows the truth -including the truth about him. Even if no one else believes in the Psalmist, this individual is an open book to God, and trusts that God knows the truth. One commentator notes that the Psalmist appears to encounter God as the “total environment of life.” But one wonders if it was always that way for the Psalmist? After all, the psalm reads as if this is someone who has been on the run. On the run from himself and on the run from God. Perhaps thinking that somehow he could escape God...or give God the slip...fleeing from God's presence...even going to the farthest reaches of the sea.

The Bible is full of stories of one's who thought they could somehow escape God or run away from God's presence. Consider fabled story in the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that somehow they could be like God and even ditch their need for God. Later in the book of Genesis we have the story of Jacob who becomes like a fugitive...a man on the run...so was Moses when he fled Pharaoh's house

into the land of Midian. Or the story of Jonah. Many of you will recall how Jonah tried to run away from God and escape God's deeper purpose for him. Adam and Eve found themselves lost in shame. Jacob slept on the ground with a stone for his pillow. Moses was alone in the wilderness. Jonah thought he was left for dead in the belly of a big fish.

Yet even in those dark places, God is there, and this is what made them people of faith. They came to know the presence of God even when they found themselves at the nadir of their existence. This was something that the psalmist himself experienced as he says, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." Sheol is a Hebrew word that refers to a shadowy underworld, a gloomy place, perhaps even an afterlife. By using it the Psalmist declares that somehow in life's darkest, most lifeless places, God is not absent. The challenge is to see God in such places and to dare to proclaim, as the Psalmist does, that God is in these places too. He says, "If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

It is always a struggle to see any beauty or goodness or truth, to discern the presence of God when we find ourselves in our lowest and darkest moments. Or in what we will anticipate will be our lowest and darkest moments in life. Take for example the current debate surrounding what is now refer to as "assisted dying." It's not that I am opposed to people having the choice when it comes to end of life issues. What concerns me more is when we can begin to devalue the possibility and presence of God even in such times and moments such as when we near death. For example, one of the advocacy groups for assisted dying calls itself "Death with Dignity." In fact, this has been a slogan for some who are in favour of assisted dying. "Death with Dignity," I cringe every time I hear that phrase since it seems to communicate that somehow, if I do not choose assisted death or do not support it, then I am forsaking dignity. Really? All I can say is I have witnessed many people who have died well, in places such as hospices, where they and their families have received wonderful, beautiful, edifying, dignifying, loving care from volunteers and other supports. Places and moments where I have recalled the verse from the 23rd Psalm that says, "even though I walk through the

valley of death's shadow, I fear no evil, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." I have discovered the presence of God to be noticeably present at times like that. You see we do ourselves a great disservice when we fail to appreciate the presence of such great a love, even in the places of darkness where the light of God can often shine the brightest to bring us a different sort of dignity. We learn even more about ourselves and what we are called to value about ourselves and those around us.

It brings us to the heart what we affirm when we say that God is with us in life, in death and in life beyond death. That the beauty, truth and goodness that is God is there in spite of the darkness to uphold and carry us with a value that we cannot see in ourselves or for ourselves. I got a sense of how this attitude that has long been a part of our Judeo-Christian tradition can transform human understanding years ago when I was studying the traditions of Celtic spirituality in Northern Wales. You see, before Christianity came to the British Isles, there were no such things as cemeteries and graveyards. In fact, archeologists have difficulty finding intact human remains from before the 4th century. They have hypothesized that when people died, they were perhaps left to lay out on a rock, left for the birds to pick the bones clean, and then perhaps, relatives might have divided up the bones to hold on to as keepsakes. Yet the Christians when they came and brought with them the belief of the value of life even beyond death. Attitudes around care for the dead changed, so that bodies were treated differently, people were remembered and valued in a whole new way...even in death. It's one of the reasons Celtic Christians even took the time to venerate their own Saints outside of the official church in Rome. The dead were raised up and remembered in a whole new way. Cemeteries were literally in the front of the church, not unlike our Memorial Garden.

What it comes down to is something I touched on last week and is an underlying theme of the faith we confess in "A New Creed." It is that God gives beauty and worth that we can have difficulty comprehending or knowing on our own. That's something the book of Ephesians echoes where it's author writes, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." The hope is that we may experience God's presence and love for us, even when we carry those secrets,

even when we are at those low points, even when we are at the farthest reaches of the sea or when the darkness closes in and we close our eyes one last time.

You know, it's no mistake that "A New Creed" ends the way it does, because so many of the troubles we face in this life, so many injustices in the world have more to do with how humans choose to value one another, with or without God. And as Christians, as followers of the One to whom the Psalmist sings his song, we are meant to have a different value. God's presence in the world is what does this.

I recently read a story about a minister who when people come to her in great distress, although she admits she does not always have a precise solution, she wants others to feel safe to share their troubles with her and that she can hopefully connect and bear witness to our loving, all-knowing, ever-present God.

In order to make her point, she sometimes reaches into her purse and takes out her wallet. She says if it's a lucky day for her, she has a \$20 bill. She'll take out and say to the one she is with, (Let's suppose his name is Ned) "Ned, if I were to give this bill to you, would you find it useful?" "Oh yes," Ned replies. Then she takes the bill and scrunch it up in a knot and then ask, "Would you still like to have it?" "Yes," Ned replies. Then she drops the bill on the floor and stamps on it several times. "Would you still like to have it?" Without hesitation, Ned replies "yes." Then she explains. "You have answered yes because you know that the maker of this bill, the Canadian government, will stand behind this bill even it is torn up and taped together or wrinkled up or stomped on."

Similarly, your maker is God. God's evaluation of you is constant, even if you are torn, wrinkled, or stomped on. Now unlike the \$20 bill, we don't come with an assigned worth. In God's eyes we are always worth more than the value we often assign ourselves. We have a worth in ways we cannot comprehend. But it is a worth and a value that remains no matter where we find ourselves, no matter our condition. Be it in life, in death, or life beyond death.