

Who Am I?

Phil 1: 1-21, Ps 139:1-6, 13-18

Sept 8, 2019

Rally Day

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Phil 1:1-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Ps 139: 1-6, 13-18

O LORD, you have searched me and known 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.

Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

Who am I?

It can take us a lifetime to answer that question.

In childhood we hear that we—for good or bad—act just like a particular relative, or that we have a certain family physical feature. In my family it's about the nose on my Dad's side. As we grow older we try on different habits, styles and interests while trying to figure out just who we are, who we want to be. We spend a long time being a mystery to ourselves. Reaching adulthood does not easily or automatically provide answers either. Our opinions, values and religious beliefs can change because of our education and experiences, and sometimes so much so that we actually embarrass ourselves by acknowledging that we once held a certain belief or political view. Even when we achieve a sense of comfortably knowing who we are, the diagnosis of a serious illness, the loss of a loved one, a move for a career opportunity, the news of an unexpected pregnancy, retirement, or any other life altering situation can make us ask "who am I now?"

While we may answer that question many times over and in many ways in our lifetime there is only One who knows the answer, has always known the answer, and always will. As we were knit together in the womb from strands of all of our ancestors, as we were knit together as something from nothing, God was already with us. Even before our parents knew we were on our way, God was with us, and already the days, the experiences, the challenges, and the opportunities were in the book of life.

Nothing about us is hidden from God, as we are known and loved intimately. And that can feel encouraging and comforting, just as it can feel intimidating and overwhelming at times. How often have we wished God could not know, would not see, an action, a deed, an omission, that we want to keep hidden? And if God knows every thought, movement, plan, idea, before we think or act, how then do we then reconcile free will and God's biography of our lives? Our life is not a script already written for us and then we step in to act out the drama and the comedy. In God's book is our *spiritual identity*, not a ledger of demerits and brownie points, but our spiritual identity--*not how we see ourselves, but how God sees us*. Our identity isn't something that we strive for, but rather something we are. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, knowing that wonderful are God's works.

We can always be real, genuine, before God without worry that we are not acceptable. God sees past the wrongs, the failures, the errors, to offer us peace and healing. This is how and why we can come to a time of confession every week in worship, acknowledge our faults, seek and always receive God's forgiveness. And then ask God to search us again.

In the words of Henri Nouwen, "Spiritual identity means we are not what we do or what people say about us. And we are not what we have. We are the beloved sons and daughters of God."

We are bombarded with cultural, media and relationship messages telling us to define ourselves by external measures, but what would it look like for us to see ourselves as God sees us? That would mean that when we think of who we are, we would not weigh successful vs getting by, or comfortable vs struggling, or good vs weak, but instead we would see, know and claim our status as one deeply beloved by God.

Knowing that we are each beloved children of God, Paul bucked the slavery system of his day as he encouraged the slave owner Philemon to accept the return of Onesimus as a brother in Christ, rather than as the runaway slave who had robbed him and fled. Paul had met the fugitive Onesimus and led to him to the Christian faith, freeing him from his bondage and into brotherhood through his spiritual identity. Paul saw the Onesimus that God saw. Paul led Onesimus and Philemon to see each other not as master and slave but to see each other with God's eyes, each deeply beloved by God.

What would it look like for us to see ourselves as God sees us?

For those buried in a cemetery in the Channel Islands dedicated to the unknown dead of World War II, a place no one knows what name or birth date or death date to inscribe on the headstones, there is One who knows and who holds the unnamed and otherwise forgotten sacrifices. Across each gravestone is inscribed "Known by God." "Known by God." "Known by God."

What would it look like for us to see ourselves as God sees us?

Spiritual identity means that when we may feel like an imposter in our own life, God knows who and Whose we are. While he was imprisoned for his resistance against the Nazis and shortly before his execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem called "Who Am I?" Through poetry he meditated upon the difference between what others said about him during his time in prison and what he felt about himself inside. Others saw him as a cheerful tower of strength and faith amid hardship but on the inside he felt restless and yearning and sick, like a tiny bird in its cage, barely alive. "Who am I?" he asked. "This man or that other? / Am I then this man today and tomorrow another? / Am I both all at once? An imposter to others, / but to me little more than a whining, despicable weakling? / ... They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.....Whoever I am, you know me, O God. You know I am yours."

Who are you? Do you see, know and claim your spiritual identity as God's beloved, as God's own heart, as one fearfully and wonderfully made? Amen.