

Knowing
John 10:11-18
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Some of you may have been following the developments in the latest spinoff of the reality TV show “The Bachelor.” “The Golden Bachelor” series, featuring people who are retired and in their 60s and 70s, aims to prove the old adage that love can be found at any age.

Gerry Turner was the first golden bachelor, a widower and retiree in his early 70’s. He thought he had found a second chance with love when he met Teresa Nist on the show, who had also lost her spouse. The two fell in love and were married at the conclusion of this first season of the series.

Two weeks ago, on *Good Morning America*, the couple announced they were getting a divorce. Opting to look on the positive side after announcing her divorce only three months after saying “I do,” Nist took to Instagram to share a famous quote from Dr. Seuss. “Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it’s happened,” the quote read.

“It was one of the most incredible experiences of my life” she continued, “something I never expected to happen at this point in my life and I truly thought it was going to last forever. It turns out, even at the age of 70, you don’t know everything.”

Relationships. How much do we *really* know about one another? The quality of our relationships does matter. Perhaps that’s why Jesus’ words to the Pharisees in John’s gospel summarize the kind of relationship he had with his disciples: I know my sheep, and my sheep know me.”

The Bible reveals two kinds of knowing. The Greeks took “to know” in an objective, almost scientific sense: we see that her hair is blonde, and so now we know it. The Hebrews came to a different understanding: knowing is not *seeing* something but *doing* something. God knows the Israelites because God creates them out of dust, chooses them as children, and cares for them as chosen ones.

The Israelites, on the other hand, know God not in their objective perception of God, but through a relationship of humble obedience and trust. Not observation but action. When Jesus speaks of knowing he speaks of it in this second sense.

Jesus knew his sheep. “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people,” he told them. Jesus intimately knows his disciples from the start because he chose them and trusted them with his mission. He knew who would stand by him as he journeyed to the cross, and he knew who would betray him. He knew their strengths and weaknesses. In the eyes of Christ, the disciples stood before him with all of their rough edges glaringly in view.

The sheep knew Jesus. In the gospels we often see the disciples as a tribe of bubbling idiots who never quite understand what Jesus says or does. It isn’t until Easter morning, and in the days and months that follow, that things begin to make sense. In their own crazy, half-hearted way, the disciples knew him in the end because they had followed him from the beginning: living together, traveling together, eating together, praying together, and laughing together with their Lord.

Jesus wore no masks; he really had nothing to hide. The masks others placed on him—traitor, liar, subversive, never stuck. Jesus didn’t play games with people either: with Herod, or Pilate, or the Pharisees, or even with God when he confesses on the cross, “Why have you forsaken me?”

“I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” I wonder how many of us can claim to know the shepherd as the shepherd knows us.

We can take the rational path and try to know the shepherd in the Greek sense, the objective sense. God becomes an object to be reckoned with on Sunday morning, or any other time I choose to deal with God. Hold God at arms’ length. Put God under the microscope: examine him, describe God, test God. Read about God and critique him. Take God off the shelf when I want or need him and put him back on the shelf when I don’t.

The second way of knowing is a little riskier. I live my life in obedience and trust that God knows me personally, intimately, in every moment of every day, in all of my triumphs and defeats, better than anyone else. With all the skeletons I have in the closet, with all the masks I wear with others. I stand before God, accepted, and loved with *all* of my humanity exposed.

With this kind of knowing there’s a real possibility for wholeness and joy in living with each other. We can often tell which path people take with God by which path they take with each other.

Take marriage. When they enter marriage, many American couples almost start from scratch in learning to communicate, in finding the tools to really know each other. American courtship practices seldom encourage a couple to know each other in depth before the wedding.

The ideal of love on television, like *The Golden Bachelor*, is one of fun and excitement. Couples are rarely presented as knowing each other in more vulnerable moments, times when they may see each other at their worst as well as at their best—times when we do not feel like smiling, or when our hair isn’t perfect, or when we’re angry, and when we have the flu; or that they should know the real person behind the toothpaste, the deodorant, or the cold remedies.

Psychology Today once published a study of 300 couples who had been married for 25 years or more. The researchers were trying to discover the ingredients that held these marriages together. Spouses were interviewed separately but their answers were remarkably similar. When asked, “Why has your marriage lasted?” both men and women answered, at the top of their lists, “Because my spouse is my best friend.”

Lots of people fear that kind of intimacy. There is a terrifying closeness about it. And some folks fear that if they are truly known, they will be rejected as unlovable or imperfect, or they will become too vulnerable to hurt or attack. All their lives, they hide behind a mask. They end up living with their mates in name and address only, while pursuing separate, private, and often lonely lives, never able to honestly say, “I know my spouse, and my spouse knows me.”

But if we live out of our trust that God knows us as we really are, then we are given the confidence and the freedom to come out from behind the facades and bare our souls, warts, and all. Partners in committed marriages have no illusions about each other. They are free to share their honest selves, trusting that in their commitment they will find acceptance in the grace of love. I know my spouse, and my spouse knows me.

In Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*, the daughter, who has died in childbirth, is allowed to return to the land of the living for one day. In a poignant scene with her mother, she tries frantically to get her mother to take close notice of her, but her mother chatters on about the daughter’s upcoming birthday party, about the presents, and other superficial things. “Oh mama,” the daughter cries out in despair, “Just look at me one minute as if you *really* saw me! We never have time to look at one another!”

I think of the married man I know who plows himself into work and leaves little time for his family. For the man who is a success seeker, work is easy: management of objectives,

concrete problem solving. I can see the results of my work. To know your work is easy. But to know your family is another matter.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger has written that people have the tendency of retreating from the mysterious to the manageable. There is always mystery present when the interpersonal is involved. The mystery of the other person, the mystery of our future together. Commitment and trust can't be managed by objectives or fit into an eight-hour schedule. So, when things go wrong in the relationship, the success seeker leaves the rat race of the home, the mystery of relationship, and retreats to something he can handle, the manageability of his work. Can this man honestly say, "I know my family and my family knows me?"

The *New York Times* carried a revealing article during the Christmas season a few years back debunking the classic image of the holidays: parents, siblings and their children gathering around the family table to catch up on one another's lives. The reality is that it doesn't always work that way. After years of discontent, some adult children choose to stop talking to their parents or returning home for family gatherings, and parents may disapprove of a child so intensely that he or she is no longer welcome at home, the article says. In a massive study in Great Britain in 2014, the largest of its kind, one in eight adults said they had cut off a family member, and one in every five reported that another relative or they themselves were no longer in contact with family.

While the reasons are complex and varied, most of these adults said their estrangements followed childhoods in which they had poor connections with parents who were physically and emotionally unavailable.¹ I know my family, and my family knows me.

It can happen in church, too. How many people I have known through the years in church, who faithfully come week after week with a smile on their face, who carry on friendly, pleasant, polite conversation, who wear a mask that fools us all. And the truth is, their world is not what they portray. Because all too often the unspoken expectation is that good Christians shouldn't have problems with their partners and their children and their work and their in-laws, and after all, what would people think if they knew the real me?

I don't know about you, but I want to be part of a congregation where I can say, "I know my church and my church knows me." A place where the level of acceptance and trust and commitment to one another is such that it becomes safe enough and gracious enough for those masks to come off, and we can share what's really going on in our lives and support each other to lift hearts, renew spirits and ultimately to take part in God's life changing love. Time and again, I have seen Westminster be that kind of church.

I know my sheep, and my sheep know me. I know my spouse, and my spouse knows me. I know my family, and my family knows me. I know my church, and my church knows me.

At the end of the classic novel, *The Little Prince*, the fox says to the prince, "It is only with the heart that one can see clearly. What is essential is invisible to the eye." We come to know the Jesus the Good Shepherd--and each other--not just with the eye that sees, but with the heart that feels and acts. May all of our significant relationships reflect that kind of knowing.

Amen.

¹ "Debunking Myths About Estrangement," *New York Times*, December 20, 2017.