2018-01-14 “Known and Loved” by Michael Cheuk

John 1:43-51; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

In 1954, psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote a book called *Motivation and Psychology*, in which he argued that human beings have a hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow, the most basic and fundamental human need is physiological: the need for food, water, air, sleep. Then we need safety and security: personal security, financial security, health and well-being and safety against accidents and personal harm. After that humans need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, whether it comes from a large social group, such as clubs, office culture, religious groups, professional organizations, sports teams, gangs, or small social connections (family members, intimate partners, colleagues, confidants). They need to love and be loved by others. In the absence of these elements, many people become susceptible to loneliness, social anxiety, and clinical depression.[[1]](#footnote-1) Maslow also identified the need for esteem and the need for self-actualization to complete his hierarchy, but for my purpose this morning, I just want to note that the need to belong, the need to be loved is a basic human need.

But in order to be loved—truly loved—one has to be known by others. But somehow, in the society and culture in which we live, it is hard to truly know one another. In many cases, we’re just too busy to invest the time. Oftentimes, we’re so busy with work, school, and other obligations, we don’t have time to fully know even our own spouses and children. I think yet another reason why we don’t really know one another is because of fear. It takes vulnerability to open up our lives for others to see the good, the bad and the ugly. In doing so, we risk being rejected. After all, if people truly know us, they may decide that they don’t like us.

Throughout all my years growing up in Shreveport, I kept all my friends at arms’ length. It had nothing to do with them. It had everything to do with me. As a first-generation immigrant family, we were poor, and I was embarrassed about the neighborhood I lived in. I went to a private high school on scholarship, and we were members of First Baptist Church, a wealthy church located in a rich part of town. All my friends lived in nice homes in nice neighborhoods, and I was afraid that if I let them see where I lived, they might not want to associate with me anymore. I remember one day at school, one of my classmates asked if my family had a yardman come to mow and landscape our lawn. I lied and answered, “Yes, we did,” but I thought to myself, “and that yardman would be *me*.” And so, I never invited anyone over to the house. I was willing to suffer through the pain of loneliness because that pain seemed less than the possible pain of being rejected.

Now maybe you’ve never had that particular struggle, but I imagine that you all have your own struggles in balancing your need for belonging and your need for emotional safety. I imagine that at one time or another, we’ve chosen the path of shutting people out instead of inviting them into the depths of our lives. Even in church . . . wait, perhaps *especially* in church, we are reluctant to risk becoming truly known because we are eager to maintain our “good” public image. But in doing so, we close ourselves off to the possibility of true belonging and unconditional love. And so we sit in church, wanting to be known but at the same time fearful of the consequences. We ask ourselves of those sitting next to us in the pews on Sunday mornings: Would you still accept me … if you knew about my past?

… if you knew about my present? … if you knew about my deepest thoughts, desires and fears?

… if you knew about my deepest failures and struggles?

In the months I’ve been with you, you’ve identified yourselves as a “friendly church,” and I wholeheartedly agree. But I’ve also heard this comment from members: “I’ve been coming to this church for years, but I really don’t know so and so.” As you look around at those here in the sanctuary, are they just persons in the pew that you’ll never know?

When Jesus began his ministry by recruiting disciples, His invitation to them was “follow me.” After hearing this invitation, Philip went to his friend Nathanael and shared with him information about Jesus: “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” But while that information about Jesus might have been correct, it was not sufficient to convince Nathanael to follow, because Nathanael had already made a quick judgment about this Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael replied, “Nazareth! Have you even *been* to Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?” Philip could have argued with Nathanael about the merits of Nazareth, but his only reply was, “Come and see.” In other words, Philip did not answer Nathanael’s question with more information. Instead, Philip answered by means of an invitation. Come and see up close how Jesus lives his life. Come and see His relationship with God the Father. Come and see for yourself whether there is anything in His life worth learning, worth following, worth imitating.

When Nathanael did decide to check Jesus out, he found out that Jesus already knew everything about him. As the Psalm writer proclaimed, “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.” Before we can know and follow Christ, we are already fully known by him. Christ is familiar with all our ways, because He created our inmost being and formed us in our mother’s womb. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. He knows our fears, our deepest thoughts, our struggles, and our failures. Before we can even follow Christ, we are known and loved by Christ. And He loves us enough to invite us to follow Him, to come and see a better way to live our lives.

When we truly believe that we are fully known and loved by Christ, it gives us the freedom and the courage to open up our lives and let others in. Because of Christ’s forgiveness, we believe that we are not defined by our past. Because of Christ’s mercy, we have hope that our present does not dictate our future. Because of Christ’s grace, we have faith that our deepest failings do not make us a failure. Because of Christ’s love, we have joy that our greatest fears need not enslave us. As Christians, we believe that when we are baptized, the Spirit of Christ comes to dwell within us, as the Word becomes flesh in those who call themselves Christians.

What? Can anything good come from human beings? Well, come and see. No, we are not perfect like Jesus. But come and see up close how Jesus is revealed in our lives even in the midst of our struggles. Come and see our relationship with God even in the midst of our doubts. Come and see for yourself whether there is anything Christ-like in our life worth learning, worth following, worth imitating even in the midst of our shortcomings.

When we look at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus’ call of Philip and Nathanael was not so much a transfer of information, nor was it a call to mission. It was an invitation to an *epiphany*, an invitation to come and see a revelation of the Son of God. Just like Jacob received an epiphany when, in Genesis 28:12, he had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There, Jacob saw the LORD God, and he called the place Bethel, “the house of God.” Jesus mentioned this incident to Philip and Nathanael in order to reveal that *He* is now the way to God, spanning heaven and earth. And when they see Jesus, they see the house of God.

In today’s culture, if we want more people to follow Christ, it will also have to begin with an invitation to an epiphany, to come and see the house of God, not in the brick and mortar, but to see Christ *in the people of God*. If we want to make more disciples, it will have to begin with an invitation for others to know and be known, to love and be loved—both by Christ and by us. This applies to both newcomers *and* to long-time members. Everyone in our congregation needs another person in the pew who knows them and loves them.

Together, let the people of Peakland Baptist Church be the house of God. Known and loved by God, let’s invite people to into this house and let’s follow Christ together.

Amen.

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s\_hierarchy\_of\_needs [↑](#footnote-ref-1)