

“With Hands in Both Pockets”

Genesis 33: 1 - 11

Romans 11: 33 – 36

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It has been said that we as Christians should always walk with our hands in our pockets. In one pocket is our glory, that truth that we are created, as Psalm 8 proclaims, just a little less than angels. In the other pocket is our humility, perhaps a handful of soil, of humus, to remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. To have only one hand in its pocket is to be unbalanced: either to think too highly of ourselves (so many wonderful metaphors for this: to have a fat head, to be a stuffed shirt, to be full of ourselves, to play god) or to think too poorly of ourselves (to feel like dirt, like a doormat, like a worm). The challenge is to find the right size for ourselves in relationship to the rest of the world – neither too big, nor too small – to see ourselves as God sees us. To know ourselves as God knows us.

Popular psychology, self-help and parenting books, and educators all teach the importance of developing self-esteem. Self-esteem is good. By no means am I knocking self-esteem. But I believe it falls short of a deeper human desire; that is the desire to be known. Affirmation, recognition and high regard feel good, but the deeper desire is to be known and accepted, not as I would like to be, but as I am. This is the love that Jesus commands: First to love God. And second, to love our neighbor as ourselves. To be known, accepted and loved as we are.

Isn't it interesting that in Psalm 139, such an intimate appeal to be made acceptable in God's sight – isn't it interesting that there is no mention of the writer's merit. It is not, O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me and found me worthy, or gifted and talented, or even righteous or faithful. Nor is it, O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me and found me lacking, or wretched, or unworthy. The focus of the psalm is on the pure wonder of the expansive knowledge of God - knowledge behind and before, in heaven and Sheol, in the light and in the darkness. And the Psalmist appeals to God to know him yet further: “Search me and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

I believe there is a longing in the psalmist's prayer: that as God knows him, he might come to know himself. So much easier said than done. The task of a lifetime. There is a story about a Dr. Harold Hyde who is said to have given the shortest speech ever at a college commencement. He stood up at the podium and uttered just these words:

Know thyself (Socrates). Control thyself (Cicero). Give thyself (Jesus of Nazareth). And then sat down.

It is not self-knowledge for its own sake that we are after. It is self-knowledge for the sake of being free enough to give ourselves. Self-knowledge enough to make choices about our behavior, not to be caught simply acting or reacting without awareness, forethought, or purpose; self-knowledge enough to know our weaknesses, to know that we will make mistakes, to know

when we have hurt another person; self-knowledge and humility enough to ask forgiveness if need be; self-knowledge enough not to judge ourselves too harshly.

We heard in our first scripture reading the story of Jacob and Esau. You may recall that Jacob, the younger brother and his mother's favorite, stole the birthright of his older brother Esau. Jacob, the thief, had to leave home fast. He ran and spent his young adult life running. He went to live with his uncle and started a family of his own. Over many years' time he accumulated possessions and became very wealthy. Finally, for a variety of reasons, he decided to return home. In order to do so, he knew he would have to face Esau. He was truly and duly afraid. He knew he could be in danger because Esau still had cause to hate him. So he sent messengers ahead with presents to appease Esau and that night he wrestled from dusk until dawn with a strange man. This man was God's angel. This man was God. This man threw Jacob's hip out of joint and still Jacob would not release him until he (the man – the angel – God) blessed him. O Lord, the psalmist says, you have searched me and known me. Jacob might continue: you have wrestled with me and blessed me with a new self-knowledge. In recognition of this shift in identity God gave him a new name – Israel – which means literally “one who strives or struggles with God.” Only with this new identity and in this humbled state could Jacob approach Esau. He moved from being the supplanter who wants what is not his own to being supplanted by God and thereby becoming God's own.

In order for Jacob to approach his brother whom he had wronged, he had to come to terms with God, the God who had known him for all he was, the good and the bad since he was conceived in his mother's womb, and, in this humbled state, receive God's blessing. How incredibly different a blessing to receive than the one he had so jealously stolen as a young man from his brother. Only with a handful of dirt can any of us truly approach reconciliation -- with God, with our brother or sister, or with our neighbor, letting go of the need to be stronger, purer, truer, or more deserving. Some of you no doubt remember the popular book about Transactional Analysis published in the 60's? I'm OK, You're OK? I once heard, and some of you may have heard this as well that the Christian version of this book would be entitled, “I'm not OK, You're not OK, but that's OK.” In a sense we could go on seeking external gain and validation endlessly out of a deep inner sense of incompleteness or a greater expectation of approval from external authority. We look to the world and to other people for this, when we should be looking to God, for it is only in this encounter of surrender that we can truly find, know and accept ourselves. When Jacob goes on from wrestling with the angel to meet his brother the next morning, it is a truly touching and frightening scene. Esau is approaching with 400 men. Rather than responding with an equal show of force, Jacob lined up his family, the women, the maids, and the children, those believed to be most vulnerable, and he joined *them* to approach his brother this way, bowing down, it says, seven times until he came close to his brother. And Esau ran to him, embracing him, both of them weeping tears of sorrow for the years lost between them, of relief and joy. Jacob was ready to offer Esau anything that he had. Esau responds by saying that he has no need, that he has enough of his own. But Jacob needs deeply to offer his brother gifts and this is what he says, words that for me represent what I want most deep down in my soul: “Truly, Esau, to see your face is like seeing the face of God. With such favor have you received me. Accept, I pray you, my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough.” And indeed, he might have said, because I *am* enough – not the best, the richest, or the most accomplished, just enough.

There is a lovely book entitled *Learning to Fall*, by Philip Simmons. At the time he wrote the book, Simmons was living with fairly advanced Lou Gehrig's disease. He lived with his yet young family in the mountains of New Hampshire, mountains he had once enjoyed climbing. It is a book about slowly gaining self-knowledge through facing a series of losses. He wrote,

“My balance is not so good these days, and a short time before I began work on this essay last summer, I fell on the short path that leads through the woods from our driveway to the compost pile. I had just helped my six-year-old daughter into the car, and started to turn down the path, when I stumbled and went down hard. I lay stunned for a few moments, face numb, lip bleeding, chest bruised, my daughter Amelia, standing over me asking, quite reasonably, what I was doing down there and whether I was all right. I wish I could have managed an answer such as ‘practicing yoga,’ or ‘listening for hoofbeats.’ What I was doing was learning to fall. In the following days I did some thinking about the expression ‘Watch your step,’ and even better, ‘mind your step.’ I thought about the Buddhist practice of walking meditation in which one becomes fully mindful of each step placed upon the earth. One of the blessings of my current stumbling condition is that I must practice this meditation continually, becoming mindful where I once was heedless. To walk upright on the earth – what a blessing!”

Self-knowledge is not acquired without pain. Some of it is the pain of facing ourselves as we are as opposed to the way we wish we were. But the result is a fullness of being. “Be a full bucket,” the poet Rumi writes. “Drawn up the dark way of a well, then lifted out, into the light.” Only by drawing deeply from the well of God's wisdom and knowledge can we truly know ourselves. Only then can we hold on to our glory and our humility at the same time: hands in both pockets. The Apostle Paul, in the passage we read this morning from the Letter to the Romans, reminds the Romans of the vast, inscrutable nature of God's knowledge, so far and away beyond knowledge we will ever have or understand. The context of this reminder to the Romans is another human squabble, not unlike the murderous sibling rivalry of Jacob and Esau. In this case it was the young church in Rome arguing over who could be saved in their new Christian community – the Jews or the Gentiles. It is amazing how human beings keep being drawn back to divisiveness. Paul's word to his church is that “*everyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways....Such knowledge is too wonderful for me...” Amen