

What is the deepest desire of the human heart? That's a pretty existential question for a San Francisco 49ers championship Sunday. The too obvious answer will be "winning the Super Bowl."

But seriously - what is your deepest heart's desire? Donald Miller, who wrote a book called *Searching for God Knows What*, wonders if the greatest desire of a human being is "to be known and loved anyway." I don't have any proof for it, but I think he's on to something. I would phrase it something more like: the deepest desire of every human heart is to be fully known and fully understood. As evidence, I'd cite books like *Please Understand Me* and songs like *You Just Don't Get Me*. Although I'd also agree with Miller on the second part of his theory: that the greatest desire of a human being is to be known - and loved anyway. As the country song goes: *Baby I need to hear you say, that you know me
You really know me and you love me anyway.*¹

Most of these songs and books are addressing our human desire for another human being to fulfill these longings. Most of them also address the reality of how hard that is to do. It doesn't mean we don't try, just as long as we recognize how imperfect we are when it comes to truly getting another person or to be truly gotten.

Which makes Nathaniel's experience so remarkable. When Jesus saw him approaching, he said, "Ah, here is a true Israelite without a false bone in his body!" Nathaniel may have looked around to see who Jesus was talking to, and when he realizes that it's him he says (maybe with some rudeness), "How do you know me? Then comes the reply from Jesus that is the answer we've all been looking for; he said: "Nathaniel, long before Philip came to get you, I saw you here - under the fig tree."

"I saw you." "I know you." "I get you." This story of one of the calls to discipleship by Jesus is also the story of our invitation to 'life under the fig tree' – where we are perfectly known and perfectly understood.

It's not surprising that this invitation references the fig tree; they are common in that area. But a fig tree also usually indicated a place where rabbis studied the Torah. It's also interesting that the Bodhi Tree, under which the Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment, is in fact a fig tree. So there's a tradition of wisdom and spiritual presence associated with the fig tree. That is the heart of our invitation to 'life under the fig tree.'

Each passage of the lectionary this week reveals what this life is like. They present us with a God who calls to us, seeks us out, draws close to us, inhabits us.

Eli tells the young Samuel, "Go back to sleep, and if you are called, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

The psalmist prays: "For it was you who formed my inward parts, you knit me together in my mother's womb."

"You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit . . . that you are not your own?" Paul writes to the Corinthians.

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asks Jesus.

¹Katrina Elam, *Would You Love Me Anyway?*

Now truth be told, the thought of this God who calls to us, who fashions us in the womb, who inhabits our bodies, who recognizes us in the midst of our daily lives – can be pretty overwhelming. Do I really want to be this well-known? What's the saying: be careful what you wish for? And anyway, how can it be that the Divine Presence would be interested in me and in my little life as a speck in the whole of infinity? I mean, did you know that in December astronomers reported that they had found the biggest black holes ever in the universe. One of them weighs as much as 21 billion Suns, and is in the brightest galaxy in a sprawling cloud of thousands of galaxies about 336 million light-years away. It's mind-boggling, isn't it? When you contemplate the scope and scale of time and space, it's enough to make you wonder: who am I among billions of galaxies?

Yet Jesus says, “When you were sitting under the fig tree, I saw you.” Maybe Jesus was thinking about Psalm 139. Yes, God is infinite, but the psalmist also describes God as intimate - 'intimately acquainted with all my ways.' The poetry of the psalm helps us – especially those of us who are more left-brain oriented – to know what 'life under the fig tree' is. “Poetry,” says John McDargh of Boston College, "tunes the 'ears of the heart' to the real way in which human beings most honestly and most deeply talk about their lives when they are speaking from the core of their experience.”

So under the fig tree, whether I feel like it or not, whether I believe it or not, I'm always safe in the presence of God's Spirit:

*If I go up to the heavens you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

Instead of feeling like a speck in the universe, I can say:

*You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body.*

“I see you.” “I know you.” “I get you.” In these days of concern over too much surveillance, too many ways that our every movement, every shopping choice, every Internet click is noted and stored for future use – this might not sound like good news. It's too much. We might want to cry out, “Where can I flee from your presence?”

But the God we see in these passages is not invasive. God doesn't enter into our lives by stealth or force. God's omnipresence is not a surveillance system designed to keep track of everything we do wrong. Somehow, this Divine Presence which pervades all of creation, from galaxies 336 million light-years away down to our very cells, is able to offer a spacious hospitality that calls to us but doesn't confine us; that continually invites but will never force us; that simply asks us to see and hear and know the One who is ever in our midst and in our own selves. To live life 'under the fig tree.'

Still, such knowledge is a little intimidating. Because, as much as we long to be fully known, we also sometimes kind of like 'flying under the radar,' keeping out of sight, playing it small. I mean face it, being *unknown* allows us to be *unnoticed*. There are things we do and say and think that we don't want to be known – by anybody, least of all God. However, the more we are aware of life under the fig tree, of the knowing, understanding, compassionate gaze of God upon us, the more we experience the transformational power of that gaze. This is not condemnation, but a call into wholeness. “Follow me,” Jesus will say to his disciples. That following meant not just the physical getting up and moving along a geographic pathway; it meant following into a way of being.

If you think that sitting under the fig tree means sipping a piña colada and reading *People* magazine, think again! Being *unknown* may allow us to be *unnoticed*; it also allows us to be *uninvolved*. But that is not the way of Jesus. "I see you." "I know you." "I get you."

The late Peter Gomes, Harvard minister, African-American theologian, Baptist preacher, who announced that he was gay a generation ago and became one of America's most prominent spiritual voices against intolerance, described it this way:

"The news is not that we are worse than we think, it is that we are better than we think, and better than we deserve to be. Why? Because at the very bottom of the whole enterprise is the indisputable fact that we are created, made, formed, invented, patented in the image of goodness itself.

That is what it means, that is how one translates being created in the image of God: it means to be created in the image of goodness itself.... People may take everything away from you, they may deprive you of everything you have and value, but they cannot take away from you the fact that you are a child of God and bear the impression of God in your very soul. You cannot be destroyed, and that cannot be denied."

If our deepest heart's desire is to be fully known and fully understood, to be known and loved anyway, then the fulfillment of that desire is at hand; it is near as our breath.

So this day, this week – pay some attention to your breath. Let it be a reminder of the Divine Presence in you and all around you, a Presence that knows you intimately and loves you deeply – our God of life under the fig tree.

Amen

1 Samuel 3:1-20

This story of Samuel's call to be God's prophet has the flavor of an ancient folktale. Before being written down, it was told and retold by one generation to another because Samuel was such a towering figure in Israel's religious and political history. The story reveals yet another instance when God was believed to have intervened to change in the direction of the nation's history. This was interpreted as God keeping the covenant made long before with Abraham and with Moses.

It is written . . .

Now young Samuel was in the service of YHWH under Eli. In those days, the voice of YHWH was rarely heard – prophesy was uncommon. One night Eli, whose eyes had grown so weak that he could no longer see, was sleeping in his room. The lamp of God had not gone out, and Samuel was sleeping in the temple, near the Ark of the Covenant. Then YHWH called to Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, saying, "Here I am, for you called me."

But Eli said, "I didn't call you. Now go back to sleep." So Samuel went back to sleep.

A second time, YHWH called Samuel and he got up and went to Eli.

"Here I am!" Samuel said, "You called me."

Eli repeated, "I did not call you. Go back to sleep."

At that time Samuel had not yet encountered YHWH, and the word of YHWH had not yet been revealed to him. YHWH called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said once

more, "Here I am! You called me."

Then Eli perceived that YHWH was calling the boy. So he said to Samuel, "Go back and go to sleep, and if you are called, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went back to sleep.

And YHWH called, "Samuel! Samuel!"

And Samuel replied, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Then YHWH said to Samuel, "I am going to do great things in Israel that will make the ears of all who hear of them ring. I am going to fulfill all the dreadful things I told Eli I would do against his family - from the beginning to the end. You are to tell Eli that I condemn his house forever, because he knew of the blasphemies of his sons against God, which he ignored. Therefore, I swear it to the house of Eli, neither sacrifice nor offering will ever expiate the guilt of the House of Eli."

Samuel lay down to rest till morning, when he opened the doors of the temple. He feared to tell Eli about the vision, but Eli called to Samuel, who answered, "Here I am."

"Samuel, come here, what did God say to you? Do not hide it from me. May God curse you if you conceal from me one word of what you were told."

So Samuel told Eli everything, concealing nothing.

Eli said, "YHWH reigns. YHWH will do what must be done."

As Samuel grew, YHWH was with him. None of Samuel's words remained unfulfilled. From Dan to Beersheba, all Israel knew that Samuel was a prophet of YHWH.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Today's readers need not get bogged down on the minutia this passage, which speaks of temple prostitution and spirituality and sexuality, but is really about the affirmation and care of our bodies. There is no mind-body dualism here: Paul is clear that the body is connected with the spirit – each shapes the other. The spirit is embodied and the body is inspired. We are called to honor all bodies and perceive and affirm the goodness of all creation. This involves feeding hungry bodies, restoring broken bodies, healing sick bodies, and affirming all bodies as beloved by God.

It is written . . .

"All things are lawful" - but not all things are beneficial for me. "All things are lawful" - but I will not be dominated by anything.

"Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will do away with them both in the end" – but the body is not for immorality; it is for God, and God is for the body. God, who raised Jesus from the dead, will raise us also by the same power.

Do you not see that your bodies are members of Christ? Would you have me take Christ's members and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever unites with prostitutes becomes one body with them? For it is said, "The two will be one flesh." But whoever is joined to Christ becomes one spirit with Christ.

Shun lewd conduct. Every other sin that a person commits is outside that person's body, but sexual sins are sins against one's own body. You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within you – the Spirit you have received from God. You are not your own. You have been bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

John 1:43-51

John's Gospel tells of many incidents in Jesus' ministry not found in the other gospels. Some actually

conflict with what the other gospels say. The way Jesus gathered disciples in one such instance. The reason for this discrepancy is made clear in this passage. Those who followed did so solely because they were convinced that Jesus was God's Messiah. This exchange between Jesus and Nathanael established this important motif in John's Gospel. Starkly evident throughout Jesus' ministry were those who believed in him and those who didn't.

It is written . . .

The next day, after Jesus had decided to leave for Galilee, he met Philip and said, "Follow me." Philip came from Bethsaida, the same town as Andrew and Peter.

Philip sought out Nathanael and said to him, "We have found the One that Moses spoke of in the Law, the One about whom the prophets wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary and Joseph."

"From Nazareth!" said Nathanael. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip replied, "Come and see."

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he remarked, "This one is a true Israelite in whom there is no guile!"

"How do you know me? Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "Before Philip even went to call you, while you were sitting under the fig tree, I saw you." "Rabbi," said Nathanael, "you are God's Own; you are the ruler of Israel!"

Jesus said, "Do you believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than that."

Jesus went on to tell them, "The truth of the matter is, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Chosen One."