

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

139:1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

139:2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

139:3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

139:4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

139:5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

139:6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

139:13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

139:14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

139:15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

139:16 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.

139:17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

139:18 I try to count them -- they are more than the sand; I come to the end -- I am still with you.

Background- Before we read the Epistle reading (Epistle meaning a "formal letter"), I want to remind us that when we read these writings of Paul to a church, he is writing to a particular situation and addressing a dilemma or conflict that has arisen. In fact, the whole New Testament, from the Book of Acts including all the letters, is filled with the ways the church deals with disagreements in an effort to seek to be faithful followers of Christ.

So understand that in the Greek world Corinth was somewhat akin to Las Vegas, a sort of "sin city" except that it was a port city which attracted sailors, merchants, the businesses that surround that culture. Corinth was an affluent, business center.

Pagan culture activities surrounded the people: temple prostitution, eating meat offered to idols, and drinking too much. In direct contrast, Paul and Jewish teaching about food, drink, and sex were in conflict to these activities. Imagine Corinth at festival time feeling much like what happens when Clemson hosts the USC football game. A week after that game, I was still picking up beer cans from the streets adjacent to the church.

In this passage Paul will quote some common Corinthian saying and then comment on them. Listen for the word of God.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

6:12 "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I

will not be dominated by anything.

6:13 "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

6:14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.

6:15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!

6:16 Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh."

6:17 But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

6:18 Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself.

6:19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?

6:20 For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

Proclamation of the Word

January seems to be the time when so many of us try to get our physical health back in order making resolutions about diet and exercise. I feel better when I take care of myself. I have more energy, less stress, and can function on all cylinders. But when I neglect my physical health, I know I am not able to be my best self.

Paul is addressing topics that many of us face daily- food and sexual ethics. But he is writing about so much more than "God wants you to be your best self." He is calling the church at Corinth and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Fort Hill church in to faithful discipleship. He is passionate about food and sex as we are, but on a deeper level, he is talking about more than the body. He is talking about desires, yearnings, and longings. And we do not need Paul to tell us that sometimes we get things wrong in this department.

And while Paul seems to be focused specifically on bodies, Paul is talking about whole selves, persons. Now the Greeks would see the body and the spirit dualistically as separate, but Paul is a Jew. And in our faith we understand that the self includes all parts of us. There is no separation between body, mind, and soul. If my mind is stressed, I begin to feel it in my body, and I am frazzled emotionally. If my heart is grieving, my mind is pre-occupied, and my body is tired. What happens to bodies happens to the whole person and vice versa. Jesus reminds us that we are called to love the Lord our God with all of ourselves; heart, mind, strength. And we love our neighbors in the same way. Prostitution violates loving our neighbor, our self, and ultimately God.

The Corinthians Christians have just committed themselves to follow Jesus, but they are living in a town that puts that commitment to the test. Now, you have to remember that the Corinthians were

Paul's problem child. They had the most learning to do. They enjoyed this new found freedom, but Paul had to teach them that with freedom comes responsibility. Just like a teenager handed the keys of the car had to learn the limits, the rules of the road, and community laws for life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. The young driver has to also learn the responsibility to others for the safety and welfare of all. Like a gun owner who has to learn the limits and responsibilities of owning a deadly weapon. I think I have read about 3 children shooting someone or themselves lately in local news because of irresponsible adults. Paul was not an American, but we can learn from him about freedom and responsibility in his letters to the Corinthians.

Faith is about whole life discipleship and care for community. We face dilemmas all the time. Chuck and I remembered a situation which brought about a faith conflict for him in his business work. Before Chuck was a teacher and a father, he worked in the Chemical and Environmental Services industry with a national corporation. He worked out of Atlanta. His business involved much of what the Corinthian business man would do. He had customers who must be entertained.

Now in Corinth there was a spa at the temple to *Asclepius* which had the best restaurant around. It served as the local country club.ⁱ One issue was that prime rib or mutton steaks served in the restaurant had come off the altar, animals sacrificed to the pagan god. The local gentry would dine there. It might be social suicide to pass up an invitation to the club. The other location would have added other "comforts" such as prostitutes for entertaining customers. Thank God Chuck was not faced with that particular situation.

Now as a back drop, before we had our children, Chuck served as a youth advisor in our church while I went to seminary. He went with the St. Andrews Presbyterian youth group one summer to one of our border ministries, *Puentes de Cristo*, near Brownsville, TX. On that trip they met a young man who wanted to help his community and local businesses know their rights. So he planned to go to law school and needed the annual tuition, \$400 to attend, but did not have the money. One of the learnings when I have visited our mission neighbors at the border is a need for self-determination. As mission partners, we cannot go in and fix all the world's problems. Local people need to be equipped to work out issues themselves. But we can partner and support them, know them, pray for them, and learn from them.

Now for the dilemma. Chuck came back from his first international mission trip with a changed heart full of the gifts that the faithful people shared. It was a mountaintop faith experience for the whole group. The week Chuck returned he, along with his colleagues at Van Waters and Rogers took a golf trip to entertain customers. They drove up from Atlanta to the Cliffs at Glassy and played a round of golf. Business as usual. But that night Chuck felt sick by the excess. Here in one day (remember it was the late nineties) they spent on golf fees, what that young man needed to be able to attend law school for one year. His conscience as a Christian was pricked. He was uncomfortable. That is what following

Jesus will do because you see your neighbors now not as them, but as members of the body of Christ, brothers and sisters. They are family.

The temptations of the flesh- pleasures, filling desires, get put in perspective and priority in a different way when you follow Jesus. Paul reminds us it is so much more than labeling things "good" and "bad." Golf is not "bad" for example. Faith is about obedience to Christ. Remembering that God who knit you, me, and all people together in their mother's womb, cares deeply about our whole selves including our appetites, our bodies. Food and sex are spiritual issues, but everything is. The question is when we return to our first love, to God's love, we make choices that reflect the value of persons as made in the image of God.

One writer reflects,

Each of us has commitments that bind us to other persons or ways of thinking and living. As Martin Luther put it in his Large Catechism: "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God."ⁱⁱⁱ Belonging to Christ means that one seeks to follow him, his teachings, and the pattern of his life - a life in service to others. That is the foundation, and then one must work out the details of living in the world from there.ⁱⁱⁱ

The place we do that is in small groups of disciples learning together, or over coffee with a Christian friend, or as we walk to class and discuss an ethical dilemma with our friend from PSA or youth group. God who searches and knows us, created us to search out God's heart and God's will. Paul wrote to a specific group of Christians dealing with a specific crisis. We're the church. We have to study, reflect, discern the will of Christ in our day and time with our specific situations. So we start with questions of faithfulness.

Desire was wired into us by God. Yearning and appetites, the laws of attraction and gravity make the world go round. Leisure, work, relationships, food all are gifts from God. But when we follow Jesus we operate on the law of love. One preacher reminds us,

Love makes the world go 'round, but this love is not a love of having and possessing and owning [certainly not owning other people]; rather, it's a love that is embracing, sharing, celebrating, and entering into union. It is love as respect and honor and trust.^{iv}

The bigger point that Paul make is that all of us belongs to God. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are not our own. We were bought with a price. Our allegiance is to God. Jesus is our lord and we seek to honor him in all we do as would a slave in Paul's day. One of our Presbyterian fathers, John Calvin, puts it this way in his Institutes:

We are not our own; let not our reason nor our will therefore sway our plans and deeds.

We are not our own; let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh.

We are not our own; in so far as we can let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.

Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him.

We are God's: let his wisdom and will rule our actions.

We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal.^v

We are not our own. We are God's. May all who come behind us find us faithful.

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ⁱ I am always grateful to the work of Bartlett and Brown, eds. in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4 (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY, 2008)

ⁱⁱ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.

ⁱⁱⁱ Commentary on 1 Cor. 6:12-20 at workingpreacher.org

^{iv} The Very Rev. Robert Giannini, Sermon for the Second Sunday of Epiphany, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 Second Sunday of Epiphany, January 19, 2003 at day1.org.

^v John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeil, translation Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 3.7.1.