

Psalm 139:1-6, 15-18
John 2:13-25
John 15:12-17

Searched and known

Sermon (Part the First)

I discovered something rather surprising last week, which I thought I'd share with you all via that very annoying process that more or less involves you guessing stuff until you get the right answer, which only I know (or until we all lose patience).

The first question: Consider for a moment the text of the Gospel according to St John, to the extent that you think you know it. Imagine that we were to remove all the little words – the “the’s” and the “ands” and the “have’s” the “was’s” and the pronouns and the helpful little conjunctions and whatever. Of the words remaining, what do you imagine is the most frequent *substantive* word we read in John’s Gospel? [Jesus]

The second question: What do you guess might be the *second* most common substantive word? [Father]

Third question – and this is the thing which surprised me – what is the *third* most common word in John’s Gospel?

The third-most common word in John’s Gospel is “know”. When you add the past tense “knew” to the count, this verb appears almost as often as the noun “father”.

Know-ing is everywhere in John – roughly a half dozen times each chapter, though it tends to clump up here and there. I thought I was onto something, that the word “know” appears so many times in John because John wants us to know something about knowing. And he almost certainly does. An influential and antagonistic background noise to John’s Gospel was the developing Gnostic movement – a broad range of mystery religions which emphasised the importance of a particular kind of knowledge. (It’s worth noting here that “gnostic” and “knowledge” have a common root in the Greek *gnosis* – one of the words for “knowledge”. And John may, in part, be engaged in a polemic about what it is to know).

But then I discovered something else. Not only in John’s Gospel is the verb “know” so frequent. It’s also the case in more general texts and speech. In natural language, the word “know” ranks in the top 50 words, and almost all the other top 50 words are just the little ones: “her”, “at”, “if”, “not” and so on.

I did not know how important knowing was. But now that I know – and that you know – I wonder, what do we know, now that we know this?

Or even better: given that knowing is so central to what we talk about, what does John know about knowing that might make a difference to our knowing?

Listen to some of the ways knowing appears in John:

^{1. 10} [The Word] was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

^{1. 18} No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

4. ²² [Jesus said to her,] You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know...

6. ⁶⁹ [Peter said to Jesus,] We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

8. ³¹ [Jesus said,] “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

11. ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all!

20. ¹³ [The angels] said to [Mary], “Woman, why are you weeping? ” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.

” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

21. ¹⁷ [Jesus] said to [Peter] the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me? ” Peter felt hurt because [Jesus] said to him the third time, “Do you love me? ” And [Peter] said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you. ”

In these texts, knowledge is sometimes the just grasping of simple facts. But more often, at least here in John, knowledge presses towards intimacy. To know something is here not to possess it but to be connected to it, to be held by it:

10. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me...

17. ²⁵ “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these [disciples] know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. ”

Those of you who grew up with a Bible translation in the King James version tradition have probably noticed what looks like the coy way in which those translations would speak of sex: “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived...” (Genesis 4. 1), and many other places besides.

“Knew” is, in fact, in the Hebrew, the word for ordinary knowing, so we don’t have an English euphemism here. We have here not euphemism but a metaphor: knowledge is intimacy and, just as much, intimacy is knowledge. And when the same Hebrew word for knowing is used elsewhere – say for God’s knowledge of Israel – it’s not directly sexual, but it is often deeply intimate. (See, for example, “know” in Hosea – a knowing both intimate and deeply compromised).

But this intimacy is not easy or natural, which brings us, at last, to the two texts indicated in our service order, which are both “knowledge” texts.

(→ John 2. 13-25; John 15. 12-17)

Sermon (Part the Second)

2. ²³ ...many believed in [Jesus’] name because they saw the signs that he was doing.

²⁴ But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

This too is knowledge as familiarity, as intimacy. But now the depth of knowing does not bode well. Jesus keeps his distance: “...[Jesus] would not entrust himself to them” because he knew them. We know(!) this experience ourselves. We “know” others – at least we imagine we do – and often we hesitate. If intimacy is the possibility of being ourselves with another person, it has to do with the presence of (or at least openness to

finding) trust, which further requires mutuality. But the intimacy in our text is one-sided. The people have seen *something* about Jesus – his impressive “signs” – but that is all. To recall what we said last week, they’ve seen the wrong kind of “there-ness” in him, and so they’ve gotten wrong what he is and what it would mean to know him appropriately.

And yet, the gospel is finally about a mutual intimacy:

15. 15 “[Jesus said to them,] I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

In this passage, “servant” denotes the wrong kind of there-ness, a lesser knowledge, an absence of mutuality, over against the intimacy of what Jesus calls “friends”. The achievement of Jesus in the gospel is precisely this “friendship”. To say that God saves is – in John’s account – to say that God makes *friends*.

What the crowds do not know at the beginning of the Gospel is finally known at the end by the disciples. The knowledge which matters takes time. It requires the slow overcoming of misunderstanding and conflict. And it is because this knowledge takes time, that it can’t be the knowledge of mere *facts*. Facts are easy: “The surface temperature of the Sun is about 5500 degrees Celsius”. This is true, but the knowledge John is concerned about is what it feels like, mid-morning in late September, to stand under an open sky.

We are accustomed these days to separating knowledge and faith, as if faith somehow overreaches, beyond the limits of knowledge. But for John, faith is not contrasted with knowledge but is a *kind* of knowing. The faithful don’t hold to anything more than anyone else. They just order everything differently, *feel* everything differently.

And so the invitation to knowledge, to faith, is not an invitation to know some *new* thing. It is the invitation to a deeper knowing of everything we already know, a quality of knowing rather than a quantity.

15.15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Nothing is added to make a servant a friend, but everything changes. The “fruit that will last” is the knowing that is love, is the love which is a deepening of mere knowing. To bear such fruit is to struggle through what passes for knowledge in most of our talk – a disconnected knowledge – into a deeper, integrated knowledge, which is the mutuality of love: the knowledge of persons, not of things.

This is the call to faith.

Or, pun intended, faith is *knowing better*. Faith is knowing better because we have come to know ourselves as God knows us: a knowing which is indistinguishable from love.

Faith is knowing that we have been searched and known, as our psalmist will put it in a moment (Psalm 139). And we have been found wanting but *still* loved, nonetheless.

Let us, then, know better.

Let us press past the mere possession of facts about each other and the world, into the knowledge which integrates, into the re-creative love by which God is making all things new.

Pressing into that love, let us become that love.

[And all God's people say...]
