

“Facebook.com”
Text: Psalm 139
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
January 27, 2008

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

Most likely, I have told you before about the young man who, in the days before e-mail and instant messaging, went off to college. For weeks, his parents did not hear a word from him. They were frantic. At last a telegram arrived. It said, “Start worrying. Details to follow.”

I recently read a sentence in an article in the *New York Times* that made me start worrying. Robert Wuthnow, a respected sociologist of Religion had written, “Unless religious leaders take young adults more seriously, the future of American religion is in doubt.” (1) That alarmed me. I set out to discover some of the details, and I did. For example, research by the Barna Group, which is a sort of Gallup poll of Christian trends, reveals that 40% of Americans between the ages of 16-29 do not identify themselves with the Christian faith. Moreover, “87% find the Christian faith to be ‘judgmental,’ 85%, ‘hypocritical’, 78% ‘old-fashioned,’ and 70% ‘insensitive to the needs of others.’” (2) I also discovered that the average age of an American Lutheran is 53, and of an American Methodist 57. (3) I would imagine that we Presbyterians are right along in there somewhere, wouldn’t you?

It is not unusual, of course, “for young people to drift away from their religious moorings when they leave home” and go to college or begin their vocational lives. (4) It’s not unusual for young adults to stay away from organized religion until they marry or have children, but with later marriages, more career options for women, and people putting off having children until they are well into their 30’s, the stay is longer. The longer the time away, the less likely the return will be. The average intervening period has stretched out now to 15 years. And yet, what a shame! So many important decisions are made in young adulthood. Professor Christian Smith, who directs the Center for the Study of Religion at the University of Notre Dame writes, “These are the most crucial years in a person’s life for the formation of personal identity, behavioral patterns, and social relationships.”

It is obvious that mainline Protestant churches, including this particular mainline Protestant church, needs to wake up and smell the coffee, as Ann Landers used to say. We need to remember that today's young adults are not necessarily looking for the same things that middle-aged and older adults are. Young adults are interested in experiential, participatory, and communal kinds of religious experiences. Those are the characteristics identified by Leonard Sweet, a professor of Evangelism at Drew University.(6)

For evidence of Dr. Sweet's points, one need look no further than Facebook.com. Aren't you proud of me knowing that there is such a thing! Eighty-five percent of all college and university students have Facebook.com. Sixty percent of them log on everyday. Users, on average, spend 19 minutes a day, doing it. I am thinking I should get a face lift before I get Facebook, but I am very interested in the phenomenon.

Facebook.com was started only in 2004 by two former Harvard students who wanted to help the people in the college and university community connect with one another. When some of us went off to college, as freshmen, we were given a Facebook. You could sit on your bed in your dorm room and go A-B-C and try to learn the faces of your classmates – that's where the name comes from. The point of Facebook.com is to answer the basic human need to know and to be known. (7) It is used by 60 million people around the world. If you've never seen anybody's Facebook site, you ought to. I have logged on to a few, and have found out all sorts of interesting things. People put photographs on their websites. They have photos of themselves, their dogs, their goldfish. People log on, make comments, leave messages, you reply, and on it goes.

I once thought this whole phenomenon of internet communication reflected a growing societal disconnect and sense of isolation, but now I have the sense that the spectacular success of these new methods of communication reflects this deep, human longing to connect to hear and to be heard, to know and to be known.

Naturally, there is a dark side. People hack their way into information they have no right to know about you. The innocent are preyed on, the gullible taken advantage of, and there is more out there in cyberspace about you and me than we wish there were. I got a chill in my blood last Sunday when I was reading the paper and the headline said, "They've Got Your Salary Number." It seems as if there is a company based in Atlanta that collects salary numbers and job titles. Right now they have 46 million Americans in the database, and they share that information with Lord knows who.

Friday, when I was writing this sermon, I took a break and logged on to Amazon.com; I wanted to buy Jim Wallis' new book, *The Great Awakening*. As soon as I clicked on the screen, there was a message for me. "Hello Joanna

Adams. Here is a list of other books we think you'd like." They know my reading habits. Soon, I guess, they'll know my eating habits. To borrow from the 139th Psalm, clearly, "Amazon.com has searched me and known me." (8)

Another Sunday, we will explore more deeply how the church must change, lest it lose an entire generation. This morning, I want to think with you about the original Facebook.com, which predates the current version by several thousand years. The 139th Psalm is the Bible's original Facebook. One of the most treasured of all the Psalms, it speaks of the innate human longing to know and be known by God, what Martin Buber called the I-Thou relationship.

No matter whether one is 19 years old or 49 or 99, all of us have within our hearts a longing for God. We cannot truly know ourselves or other people without the knowledge of God. John Calvin, the intellectual and theological giant of our mainline Protestant tradition, had it right. Without the knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. And without the knowledge of God, there is no knowledge of self, or of anyone else. (9) The Psalmist marvels that God knows everyone and everything in the universe, including him. "You search out my path and my lying down; you are acquainted with all my ways. If I take the wings of the morning and settle in the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me. Your right hand shall hold me fast. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high I cannot attain it."

I like the language Eugene Petersen uses in translating one of the verses of the 139th Psalm: "Investigate my life, O God. Find out everything about me. Cross-examine and test me. Get a clear picture of what I am about." (10)

I wonder if you would ever make a request like that of God. "Investigate my whole life, please, almighty God. I want you to know everything about me." I will admit I might have to clear my own throat a few times before I prayed a prayer like that, and yet, this is the core of the matter. Whom else can we trust to know us fully and to care for us unconditionally?

It does no good to present a false face to God. God can see through to the very heart of who we are. I believe that beneath and beyond our longings for one another in a romantic sense and a sexual sense, in the sense of friendship and community, beneath and beyond all of that – is our need to be close to our Creator. What did Augustine say, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." God our Creator, who knitted us together in our mothers' wombs in the first place and who has promised to guide us everyday in the way everlasting, knows the whole story already.

The Psalmist, not with resentment, but with gratitude and a sense of marvel, says, "Lord, you know what I am going to say before I even know what I am going to say. You know how many breaths I am going to take before I even breathe a breath or live my life."

When you first think about these things, they sound a little scary. I mean, really, can't we have a few boundaries here? But then we remember that God is after us, God wants to know and does know all about us, not because God is trying to "get" us, but because God wants to help us, to give us divine grace, wants to keep us from falling off this or that or the other deep end. If I go out to the farthest limits of my anxiety, and I have no idea of how I am going to get through the next week or month, it's really good to know that way out there on the edge, God is going to hold me fast. If I walk through such a time of depression that the darkness has covered me up, I can hang on for dear life to the assurance that the darkness itself is as light to the Lord

All of us will have darkness, sooner or later, before we're done. Most of us will have the feeling, sooner or later, that God is far away, that God has stopped caring, that we have been abandoned in some way. But think of how it is on a dreary, cloudy day, that you cannot see the sun at all, but do you doubt that behind the clouds the sun is there, shining? (11) The Psalmist says, "Even if I make my bed in hell, God will be there too."

If I were to ask you what the number one problem facing young people today is, I wonder what would you say. I would say it's the same problem I faced when I was a young adult. I would say it's the same problem my grandparents probably faced. It is a simple but universal problem. That is the question of whether or not I matter. The psychologists use the term "self-esteem". I think beneath the self-esteem question is the existential question of whether or not it makes any difference that I am in the world or not. Do I matter? Do I have any worth?

I sometimes watch a rough television show on HBO called "The Wire". Set in Baltimore, it's about a lot of things- drug trafficking, police corruption, and so on. But mainly it is about kids and young adults who have concluded that they do not matter to anybody. As a consequence, they are willing to do just about anything to themselves and to others.

How many people there are in this world, how many young people, how many young adults, who have never had anyone tell them, "YOU are wonderfully and fearfully made. There is no one on earth even remotely like you. You have a particular purpose that no one else who has ever lived will be able to fulfill except YOU."

Our Maker will go to any length for us, including dying on the cross to defeat our darkness, including following us wherever we end up, and bringing us home. What was it Robert Frost wrote in *The Death of the Hired Man*, "Home is the place where, if you have to go there, they have to take you in." That's the way God is with us. Our home is with God, and God will not let us get away.

I think of the older poem written by Francis Thompson:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days.
I fled Him, down the arches of the years.
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter
Up vistaed hopes I sped. . .
And yet those strong feet followed,
Followed after.

The church in the 21st century must be the place where people of all ages, but especially young people, hear the great news that there is a love that will not let them go. That we matter to God, not just a little bit, but a whole lot. God will go with us all the way. The Church needs to be the place where we get the message that God is not wanting to destroy us or exercise wrath against us. God celebrates the wonder and uniqueness of who we are. The message needs to be loud and clear, that nothing, not even the worst that life can do, can break the bonds we have with God and God has with us.

Creature-Creator, I-Thou. "In life, and in death, we belong to God." (12) It is a done deal. We belong to God forever.

There is one thing in this world we must never forget. Not our password. Not our social security number. Those mean nothing compared to this: The one thing we must never forget is that we owe our lives to the One who knows us better than we know ourselves. We owe our lives to the One who has dropped the mantle of dignity upon our shoulders, and who has promised to go with us all the way.

I close with these words from a Prayer of Thomas Merton, the great Trappist monk:

Dear God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself...and the fact that I think that I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe this:
I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You.
I hope I have that desire in everything I do.
I hope I never persist in anything apart from that desire.
And I know if I do this You will lead me by the right Road, through I may know nothing about it at the time.
Therefore I will trust you always, for though I may be lost-and in the shadow of death-I will not be afraid, because I know You will never leave me to face my troubles all alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

- (1) "A Challenge for Churches: Adulthood Takes Its Time," *New York Times*, 12/8/07.
- (2) Bill McKibben, "Taking the Gospels Seriously," *The New York Review of Books*, January 17, 2008, p.44.
- (3) Ibid, p. 42.
- (4) *New York Times*, 12/8/07.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) Quoted by Roger Nishioka in an article in *Presbyterian Outlook*, September 3, 2007.
- (7) K.C. Ptomey, "A Homily on Psalm 139," Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville Tennessee, 9/9/2007.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.i.1-2
- (10) As quoted by K.C. Ptomey.
- (11) Joseph B. Mullin, "The Christian Lives With Joy," First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, NC, 11/26/78.
- (12) A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church, USA.