



Epiphany 2

Proper 2, Year B

January 15, 2012

Psalm 139

A sermon by the Rev'd James J. Popham

We live in an age where, as they say, the only constant is change. And not only change, but rapid and accelerating change. We need only consider the impact of new modes of communications and connection and community – or more accurately, virtual community – just within the past decade. We have seen Email emerge as a dominant mode of communications, only to be eclipsed, at least for younger generations, by instant messaging, then texting, and now by social media like Facebook and, for the more staid adults among us, LinkedIn. Now, not only our terriers (and, I suspect, our cats, as well), but also our phones are quite certain that they are smarter than we are.

And as people of God and followers of Christ, we might wonder how we can find divine guidance about proper use of electronic and social media, especially in scripture, which is compiled from stories and accounts and letters and song and poetry from thousands of years ago. But then we read Psalm 139. As we just did a few moments ago. Does it have something to say to us about electronic communications? Even though it is traced back to the post-exilic period, when the Jews returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon and rebuilt the temple in the 4th Century B.C.

In briefest terms, this Psalm is an affirmation that God knows us and is with us. In fact, God's knowledge of us is complete, and God's presence with us is inescapable. The word knowledge or to know appears in the Psalm seven times, a number that in the literary symbolism of the time indicated fullness or completion. And to say that God knew when the Psalmist sat down and when he or she got up is in the Semitic tradition to say, again, that God knows everything there is to know about us. And how does God know everything there is to know about us? Because God's presence is inescapable. Again, as in last week's reading from Paul, we see the word for spirit, as *ruach*, connoting wind, something that is present everywhere. The Psalm even implies that God is present even in Sheol, the place of the dead, typically thought to be beyond God's reach. So make no mistake. God is everywhere we are. And why does God know everything about us? Because God created us. Not only the cosmos, not only the people of Israel, but each of us, as an individual. God knit us together in our mother's wombs. Indeed, we were intricately woven there. And as our creator, God loves us.

And to us, this the Psalmist says is wonderful, so wonderful that it is incomprehensible:

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.¹

¹ Psalm 139.6 (NRSV).

But then the Psalmist reveals some ambivalence, as, indeed, we might, too. There is this notion of hemming in. It might be threatening for God to know all there is to know about us. The Hebrew verb used for "hem" is *sur*, which can mean to protect, but also to besiege or confine.² And in truth, are there things we might just as well prefer to keep from God? Of course, hiding things from God is impossible. But hiding things from family, friends, and acquaintances – and even from ourselves – is another matter. John Calvin, in his reflection on Psalm 139, reminds us of that it is "risky to dismiss the deceptive coverings under which most men [and women] take refuge."³

It is here at this point of "deceptive coverings" that we confront electronic communication and social media. Here is where we must acknowledge the limitations that fear of self-disclosure impose on our ability to achieve true connection and community. And here is where we must peel away the illusion that electronic communications and social media are the antidote to our penchant for "deceptive coverings."

Consider email or texting or instant messaging. Experts in communications would say that text, the written word, conveys only about 10 per cent of the meaning in a message. The missing elements of inflection and, particularly, body language are missing. And, please, let us not fall back on emoticons, those cute little smiling happy faces and what-have-you formed from colons and parentheses and other symbols and punctuation marks. They simply lack the nuance that our tone of voice projects. So in Email, we miss so much of the message. Is it always deception or even unintentionally deceptive? Hopefully, not, but it is woefully inadequate when a message has any emotional content. And how often is that?

At least in a telephone conversation, inflection is not lost. And video communications systems like Skype, we gain both vocal inflection and facial expression. Still, our grandchildren must think we are two-dimensional.

Social media like Facebook, however, easily become vehicles for deception. In an article that appeared in the *Huffington Post* last week, Skye Jethani, the senior editor of *Leadership Journal*, a publication of Christianity Today International, touched on this danger:

I think a case could be made that the emergence of digital communication and online social media has made religious hypocrisy a more dangerous temptation today than we often recognize. Lee Siegel in his book *Against the Machine*, discusses how we hide behind false, "phantom" identities on the internet. It's a medium we think fosters immediacy and authenticity, but in truth it breeds shallowness. It allows us to easily build and present a facade to the world; an image of who we wish to be rather than who we really are. And in the case of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, intimate relationships that peer behind our facades are nearly impossible to foster (despite

² *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 1235-36.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Calvin Translation Society, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) VI:5:206, cited *id.* 1236.

what so many 16-year-old girls wish to believe). In other words, on the web hypocrisy is not only easy, it is mandatory.⁴

Now the context of the article involved Tim Tebow and whether his very public prayer and acknowledgement of Jesus's role in his life was hypocritical. He concluded, rightly, that neither he nor we are privy to Tim Tebow's heart. So it hardly is for us to judge whether he is a hypocrite.

But his point about "phantom identities" is universal where social media are concerned. Would a church, for example, on its church Facebook page describe internal squabbles or expose its perilous financial condition for the world to see. Would we advertise our deepest fears or confess our most heinous missteps on our Facebook pages, exposing them to hundreds upon hundreds of our supposed "friends."

It takes more than Facebook and Email and texting and whatever else the digitization of communications can inflict upon us in the future. None of these new means of communicating are inherently bad or wrong or evil. They are just limited. And they can invite the sort of shallow, self-serving connections that mock intimacy and create only an illusion of community. When we create glowing images of ourselves for others, we tell only part of the story. The irony may be that technology has created the best-connected, least-connected generation in history. So what have we to gain by fooling anyone else? What have we to gain by letting modern means of communication become tools of reticence and deception?

In the motion picture *The Way* (Now playing at Canyon Meadows – and worth every bit of the five bucks you would pay to get in), Martin Sheen portrays a doctor walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain. He is invited to an intimate gathering of Gypsies, but when he arrives he finds over a hundred guests. He asks his host if this is an intimate party, how big is a real party? The answer from the host: three thousand. And the Martin Sheen character asks, "all of them your close friends." And his Gypsy hosts says, "Yes." And you know he is not talking about mere acquaintances, but friends with whom he has sat at table, broken bread, and drank wine, with whom he has danced and shared stories and intimacies and embraces.

That is why we gather every Sunday. It is why we have coffee after service. It is why we share meals together. It is why we have round tables and even why we, on rare occasion, celebrate the Eucharist in the parish hall, where we can face each other, and see something more expressive and revealing than the backs of our heads.

Indeed, the least heralded aspect of our Sunday worship may well be the gathering of our community. This is where we defeat the subversive tendencies of electronic media to put walls up even where we are communicating in ways never dreamed of when the Psalms were written.

⁴ Skye Jethani, "Is Tim Tebow a Hypocrite?" *The Huffington Post*, January 8, 2012 (accessed January 9, 2012), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/skye-jethani/is-tim-tebow-a-hypocrite_b_1184345.html?view=screen.

Friends are made and communities are formed, relationships flourish and communities blossom in face-to-face encounters. And that takes words, and inflection, and body language. It takes the stories of our lives and the courage to share them, the good, the bad, and the ugly. And that will happen when we can learn to trust the love of God, to show that love to others, and to trust in the love of others, as the Psalmist trusted the love of God. The Psalmist knew it was a risky business. And it is. But we cannot fool God, whose presence we cannot flee and who knows "when [we] sit down and when [we] rise up."⁵

Amen.

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⁵ Psalm 139.2 (NRSV).