



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
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## **Conversations With God: God Knows Us and God Loves US**

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 139:1-8 | John 3:18-24

There are people who think that birth order—whether you're the oldest child, the youngest child, or somewhere in the middle—is destiny. That birth order explains everything about you—your personality, your school performance and career choices, your relationship with your parents and siblings, all your subsequent relationships—in fact, that birth order determines everything about you.

Believe it or not, there are people who think like that . . . my two older sisters, for example. Just in case you don't have siblings like mine, let me give you an example of proverbial birth-order wisdom:

The oldest child is the one who thinks, "If you really knew me, you couldn't possibly love me."  
Whereas the youngest child is the one who thinks, "if you really knew me, you couldn't possibly NOT love me."

You may have noticed there is no proverbial wisdom about middle children; and if you did, you're probably a middle child: "The oldest gets all the attention with great parental expectations; the youngest gets all the attention with great parental indulgences—but nobody pays any attention at all to us middle children—we're simply forgotten, left to fend for ourselves."

It's in the Bible too. Adam and Eve are oldest children: after they've eaten the forbidden fruit, they hide from God in the Garden: if you really knew me, you couldn't possibly love me.

Joseph, in the Old Testament, is a youngest child: the beloved child of Jacob's old age; Jacob indulges him with a special multi-colored coat with big sleeves—which means that not only is he Dad's favorite but also that he doesn't have to do any work. And then Joseph has all these dreams, dreams in which all his older brothers circle around him, and bow down to him as the center of attention, and then he tells his brothers these dreams, blithely expecting them to love him all the more for them. If you really knew me, you couldn't possibly NOT love me.

Joseph's older brothers rip off his coat, throw him in a pit, and leave him for dead.

I remember when Graham, my youngest, first heard this story: we were in church, and he was sitting next to his two older sisters. I tell you, it was as if the scales fell from his eyes. He looked over at them with this amazed look of dawning comprehension and more than a little fear: "This explains everything!"

By the way, there are no stories about middle children in the Bible. (Yes, I know: you middle children are not surprised.)

But I wonder, when it comes to God, do we feel more like oldest children? Or youngest children? Or middle children?

I suppose we feel like all three at various times in our lives, depending on events and circumstances. But then again, maybe birth order does determine something: maybe oldest children are more pre-disposed to feel like oldest children vis-a-vis God, youngest like youngest; and middles are sure that God has forgotten them altogether.

But I have to say that, in my experience, the majority of Presbyterians—no matter whether they are oldest, youngest, middle, or only children—the majority of Presbyterians I know feel more like oldest children more of the time when it comes to God: if you really knew me, you couldn't possibly love me.

And so we hide. Which makes conversation difficult. It's hard to have a real conversation with someone when you're trying not to let the other person see you, or see only part of you—the part you think that person will love or at least find acceptable. In other words, it's hard to have a genuine, honest, open conversation with God when you're putting up a false front (which, I suppose, is true for our human-to-human conversations, too.)

Which is why, when I'm feeling guilty, I try to keep my prayers as short and as perfunctory as possible; or better, avoid them altogether. It's a way of hiding from God—and from myself.

And let's be honest, sometimes, with regard to other human beings, there's good reason for being cautious. We've all had experiences when we've been open and vulnerable in a conversation, and then had the other person turn around and use it against us. Let's call that what it is: betrayal.

But that's not God. God's love is steadfast. God knows us, really knows us AND loves us. At least that's what the Bible says. And maybe we should listen, because maybe through the Bible God is trying to have a conversation, being vulnerable—with us. Listen again to Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

[God does know us—really]

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,"  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

[there is no place to hide]

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

[God knows us, really knows us AND God loves us.]

And yet we have so much trouble believing this.

I had a friend at Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis, she's since gone to glory, but she was the administrative assistant for pastoral care, which means she was often the first person members talked to when a loved one died. And she was the person who would help the family with, and through, the funeral. She was a pastor—she comforted those who mourned and blessed them. She was not ordained, had no seminary training, no college degree, but she was a pastor. And because it was a large church—4000 members—her job could be emotionally and physically exhausting. So sometimes, after work, after an especially hard funeral, some of us pastors would take her out.

I remember one of those times, as the evening wore on, I was telling her how much I appreciated her and her ministry.

"Oh, Richard, you don't know me."

"Pat, you're crazy: I've worked with you for eight years: I know you."

"No, you don't really know me."

I looked at her incredulously: “Pat, what are you saying? That you’re a worse sinner than everybody else?! C’mon—You know better than that: you’ve worked with pastors—for years!”

Silence.

“Pat, God loves you.”

Now it was her turn to look at me incredulously: “No, no, no,” she said, “if God really knew me, God couldn’t possibly love me.”

And there, then, in her look, I saw it: the look of the oldest child: that look that said God could—and would—forgive everyone else’s sins—the whole world’s sins—but not hers.

“Oh for God’s sake, Pat, you don’t have any sins!”

Now, I know, I know, you don’t have to tell me: “You’re crazy” and “You don’t have any sins”—that’s not what they teach you to say in seminary. And anyway, I could see I wasn’t convincing her. So I told her about Desmond Tutu.

Back in the early 1990’s, I got to hear Desmond Tutu preach at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Desmond Tutu (you may remember) was (he’s retired now) the Anglican archbishop of Capetown in South Africa; he was the first indigenous black South African to hold that position. He was an outspoken opponent of apartheid from early on, and in 1984 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his courageous advocacy of non-violent change.

Now Peachtree Presbyterian has one of those elevated pulpits, like a crow’s nest. There’s this spiral staircase that you climb up—it winds around a central column—and you climb way up, and then step onto this little platform with a flat wooden canopy over it. The preacher literally stands right in the middle of the sanctuary, high above the congregation, looking down. In the congregation, you sit there (like this) looking up, like you’re looking up into heaven.

Now I’m not quite sure what I expected that day as Tutu climbed into the pulpit—probably a sermon along the lines of “Proclaiming the Gospel in an Era of Post-Colonial Globalization”—I’m not quite sure what I expected, but I’ll never forget what I got.

Tutu was a small, slight man. He wore thick, oversized eyeglasses. He climbed the steps, slowly. He stepped into the pulpit—slowly. He paused. He said nothing. He leaned out over the railing, looking us over—slowly. His eyes seemed preternaturally large looking down on us. Still, he said nothing. He looked us over again. Still not a word. The silence grew . . . until, at last . . .

“God loves you,” he proclaimed in this strangely high-pitched, but strangely powerful, lilting voice. He paused, looking us over again—slowly. Long silence.

“God loves you,” he said in the same voice, and then looked us over again. Still longer silence.

He leaned even farther out over the railing. It was as if he was looking into the souls of each one of us. If God came to this earth in the form of a praying mantis wearing a black and purple robe, this is what God would look like. And sound like:

“God loves you.” Every time he said it, his eyes seemed to grow even bigger, magnified behind those large, thick glasses. There was a shuffling of feet, a rustling of bulletins, a clearing of throats, a few muffled coughs.

“Apparently you did not hear me. Little children, hear me now: “God loves you. I mean, you. And you. And you. And you. . . .”

Now at this point, the whole bar had turned around and was looking at me. So being the youngest child that I

am (never adverse to being the center of attention: if you really knew me, you couldn't possibly NOT love me) I got up, stood on my chair, and began to do it not just for Pat, but for all of them, too, the whole bar: "God loves you. And I mean you, and you . . ."

And as embarrassing as it was for everyone at our table, and as amusing as it may have been to everyone at the bar, I'm still glad I did it. I think I was right to do it: both for Pat and for the whole bar! Just as Desmond Tutu was right to do it for the whole congregation that day. We all need to hear it. All of us. Everybody.

By the way, in his speech, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Tutu said this:

This award is for you, mothers, who sit at railway stations trying to eke out an existence, selling potatoes. This award is for you, fathers, sitting in hostels, separated from your children for 11 months a year so you can work. . . . This award is for you, you mothers who sit on soaking mattresses in squatter camps in the winter rain, holding whimpering babies, whose shelters are destroyed callously every day. . . . This award is for you, millions of you, all of you, who have been uprooted and dumped as if you were rubbish. This award is for you.

In other words, Tutu was saying to the least of these, to all those whom the world treats like rubbish: "God loves you, especially. And you. And you. And you. And you."

We all need to hear it. Again. And again. And again. And again. No matter where we are in the birth order, no matter the events and circumstances of our lives, we all need to hear it again. I don't know why we need to hear it again and again—it's all around us in the very fabric of the universe: in the being, the unique existence, the beauty, the goodness that God has given everything in the universe—from our DNA to our fingerprints to the different coloration of every cardinal that comes to the feeder—We can see the love that God has lavished on the particularities and peculiarities of every particular thing in the universe—from the smallest subatomic particle to the greatest, non-gravitationally-bound supercluster of galaxies—from the sound of each voice to the uniqueness of every smile—God's love is all around us.

I don't know why we need to hear it again—maybe because pain—our pain, the pain of the world drowns it out; maybe because the noise of the world, the distractions of the world, make us deaf to it; maybe because we're not paying attention; maybe because we're too busy putting up a false front, too busy trying to hide from God to hear God trying to have a conversation with us, and maybe we do that because all we can hear is our own hearts condemning us.

If that's true of our hearts, then we need to hear to the words from First John: God is greater than our hearts, and God knows everything.

Meaning that God knows us, really knows us. AND God loves us. Meaning that we are all children of God.

And I have to tell you: what I said that evening to Pat—"For God's sake, you have no sins"—as much as it provoked her incredulity, as theologically incorrect as it may sound to our Protestant ears, I have to tell you, I think it is in a sense already true for all of us (we are washed clean in the blood of the lamb). And I think that one day, ultimately, bye and bye, it will be completely true for all of us, as it is now already for Pat.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

God knows us now—really knows us as we really are, AND God loves us. And therefore, one day, we shall know—really know—and love—really love—God, fully and completely.

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Little Children, hear me now: God loves you. God loves you.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.