

A Sermon by Alex Evans from Sunday, September 9, 2007

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

“A God Who Knows and Sustains”

So, do you think you are smarter than a 5th grader?

That seems to be a growing question these days, at least if you watch a little TV, or read the newspaper. And I am not talking about the presidential campaign, or partisan politics, which assume we can only handle 5th grade-type sound-bites.

No, there is a new TV show with that very title: *“Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?”* It is hosted by the well-known comedian, Jeff Foxworthy. And he has various contestants come on the show to see if they can answer grammar school questions. Here is how it works: there is a small group of 5th graders, who sit at their school desks on the set. The adult contestant tries to answer basic questions from subjects like “2nd grade geography,” or “3rd grade math,” or “4th grade social studies,” or “5th grade science.” The 5th grade students on the set are also answering each question. And actually the contestant can get some help on the answers from the kids in the class – he or she can “copy” an answer from one of the 5th graders, if he or she does not know it. The contestant can be given an answer and be “saved” by one of the 5th graders. But eventually, the contestant has to answer grammar school questions on his/her own to win the big money. And it always comes down to that basic question – “are you smarter than a 5th grader?”

Just to peek your interest, here are a few sample questions:

- “What percentage of the earth’s surface is covered with water?” When we hear the question, we know we have heard the answer, but what is it? 70%? 80%? 90%? And most 5th graders probably know the answer.
- “In the area of measurements, how many teaspoons fit into a tablespoon?” We know one is bigger than the other, but how much bigger? Is it one and a half? Two? Or Three? And most of these questions are not multiple-choice.
- “How many states in the United States border the Pacific Ocean?” That is a tricky question. Is it only three? Fifth graders are probably more ready to get that one right.
- “What is the biggest bone in your body?” “Which is higher in the sky, cumulus or cirrus clouds?” “Carefully” is an example of what kind of word? “Who was the fourth president of the US?” “What is the fastest bird on foot?”

These are fun and challenging. Generally, we all have some familiarity with these questions, but getting the right answer is not always easy. So this subject has many of us amused, especially when comedian host Jeff Foxworthy makes fun of all of us with how little we might actually know compared to 5th graders.

All of this can lead to some interesting reflection about **knowledge**. Right here in this university community, we are seriously engaged in knowledge. Virginia Tech is about “inventing the future” and “putting knowledge to work.” This is a community of higher learning. It is about knowledge – not knowledge about 5th grade facts, but

knowledge that makes the world better and shapes our lives. And this is Higher Education Sunday in the life of our church, where we celebrate knowledge and learning as an important aspect of Christian faith. Jesus calls us to love God with heart, soul, MIND, and strength.

But knowledge is a complex word. On one hand, it is about facts and data. It does involve learning about the fourth president and the states that border the Pacific Ocean. It does involve measurements and science and health and history. And one part of learning is growing and mastering certain facts, accumulating data. This has long been how we learn. Copernicus was a scientist who built on what had gone before him, Galileo built on Copernicus. Newton built on Galileo. Einstein built on Newton, and many others continue to build on that. Facts, and data, and clarity about things accumulate.

And sometimes it is important to remember these things; but other times it really does not matter that much, which is why this new game – are you smarter than a 5th grader - is so fun. 5th Graders and other elementary school children learn lots of facts. Knowing facts and data help us know and understand our lives and the world.

But then we realize how many of these things we forget. The biggest bone in the body, the difference between cumulus and cirrus clouds, which bird can run fastest – hmmm, we knew those things at some point, we have heard this before, but what is the answer? And we can laugh at ourselves and one another that we may not be smarter than a 5th grader!

Facts and data are not the only kind of knowledge. A large part of knowledge can come much more from what we sense in our hearts than from what we learn in our heads. A large part of what we know may come from what we feel in certain moments, or what we trust with the depth of our souls. A large part of wisdom and knowledge can come from what we have learned, not in classrooms, but from people who have loved us, from experiences that have nurtured us, from faith, from perspectives, from insights, from truths that really are not measured or accumulated, but also so significant in shaping up and helping us live.

And certainly when it comes to knowledge of God, while it is based on facts and other things verifiable, it is often based more on encounters, in a relationship, on love and hope, on promises and possibilities. It is based on experience. It is based on faith – often **trusting** where we have not seen, **going** when we are not sure where to go, and **loving** even when we are not sure how, and **hoping** based on God's promises to us. But we do trust and go, love and hope because God goes with us, and never leaves us. We gain this kind of knowledge across our lives – as we encounter God, as we look for God, as we seek to love and worship and serve God. We gain this knowledge as we place our lives in moments and activities where God might be more visible, better experienced – like worship, like Bible study, like prayer, like service opportunities, like community life. And all those moments of encounter help us discover God in all the other moments of our lives too.

Certainly, that is the experience of so many people in the pages of our Bible. Think about Abraham and Sarah – at some point God appeared in their otherwise ordinary lives, in what is now Iraq, and called them to go and do. Some knowledge, some deep sense of God's presence and purposes moved them in a new way. And their

lives were changed and the world was changed. Remember the life of Moses – he was keeping sheep in the plains of Midian, out from Egypt, and God said to Moses – “go and set my people free – and I will be with you.” It was some experience – not just facts and data – that moved him, strengthened him, empowered him. Think about David, a shepherd boy. Think about Mary, a young girl. Think about Peter and James and John – crusty fisherman. All these were carrying on in their pretty ordinary and busy lives. Are they so special and different from us? Not really, but they were open and receptive to an encounter, a relationship, a sense of God. And God encountered each one of them, engaged them, entered each of their hearts to give them knowledge and purpose. Was it data and facts? I don’t think so. It was an experience. It was personal. It was about their hearts and soul and mind and strength; and it was about God leading them another way, shaping life, giving direction and purpose. And all of that led to a new knowledge, a perspective on life, a way of living, a way of loving and serving, which is why each of those people are so well remembered. All across the ages, many people, including many of us, have had a powerful sense of God’s love and care and presence and purposes guiding us, shaping us, sending us.

Our Scripture passage today is a familiar and favorite psalm – Psalm 139. And it really is about knowledge – not facts and data knowledge – but wanting us all to know – know in our hearts, know in our souls, know in the core of our being, – know really and relationally that we are held and sustained, loved and cared for by our Loving God.

And why is this so important? Because just as we forget the data and facts we might have learned in the 5th grade, we also forget the relational truths, the foundational love, the sustaining connections to God that actually shape and hold our lives through all things. In all of our racing and going, in all of our efforts to do our jobs, and raise our kids, and get the good grades and the next promotion, and pay the bills, and tend to our parents, and enjoy the good life, we forget or minimize the One who knows us and sustains us. What Psalm 139 wants to do, along with so many other passages and pieces of Scripture, is to keep us enfolded in that sustaining love and care.

Do we just live our lives in this crazy and hard world? No, it says whether we sit down or rise up, God is with us.

Are we all alone dealing with the disappointments that come our way, the cancer that eats at us or our loved ones? No, it affirms that God is acquainted with all our ways.

Should the fears of a new year, the uncertainties of campus life, the risks with which we all live dominate our thoughts and concerns? No, the Word says “you are behind and before me, you lay your hand upon me.”

What knowledge shapes our life? Is it academic knowledge, or head knowledge only? Well, in all these affirmations that unfold in this psalm, it says: “such knowledge is too wonderful for us,” because it gives us a foundation, a perspective, connections to God and to one another that intend to frame our lives.

We live in these days with many challenges and uncertainties. But this psalm says we live with God: where can we go when God is not with us? Heights, depths, morning, the far seas? God’s hand is leading us; God’s love is sustaining us. Our lives are sustained - from our earliest beginnings to forever, from our most difficult moments to the best seasons of life; we live and belong to God.

And how easily and quickly and often we forget it, just like other truths that slip away from us.

Many of us were in Lane Stadium on Thursday night at the “Concert for VT.” It was a good and memorable evening of music and entertainment by some famous stars. The intention was to bring people together, to make, as Dave Matthews said, some good memories to replace the bad memories. Each of the musicians tried to offer his best stuff for unity and community and hope. Phil Vasser ended his time by singing John Lennon’s famous “Imagine” – that imagines a world of peace. NAS offered words of hope from his difficult neighborhood experiences of his youth. John Mayer sang his famous song – “Waiting on the World to Change.” And the Dave Matthews Band moved the crowd – at least those who were there to the end – with his rendition of “Don’t worry, every little thing is going to be all right.” All these were fine attempts through music and community to offer a message of hope and life to this campus and town looking for healing and renewal.

But finally, and what Psalm 139 wants to do, is to penetrate our crazy and frenetic lives, and enfold us fully, and help us understand ultimately some very important knowledge – “such knowledge is too wonderful for me.”

It is this knowledge: no matter what happens to us, God is caring for us. When we sit down and rise up, God is there. Whether we are fretting about certain fears or dealing with numerous doubts, God is acquainted with all our ways. Whether we are not sure how to think about new locks on classroom doors, or who has a gun, or how to stay safe, God discerns our thoughts. Whether we are worrying about Bin Laden still on the loose, or a confused world with so many antagonisms, the psalm affirms that God is leading us. Whether we are lying in an MRI machine, or getting chemo treatments, or getting fresh insights about the frailty of life, the psalm says even the darkness is not dark to God.

All of this is the knowledge that sustains us. All of this is the love and hope that is ours from God. It is knowledge that fills us, enfolds us, changes us. It is not so much about facts, but a sense of being cared for by God in all things. It is not so much about information, but trusting and discovering comfort and confidence for our lives and our world. And it is the message of Jesus Christ. Nothing separates us from God’s love and light.

Friends, let’s work on nurturing one another in that knowledge, and never forgetting it. Let’s work on finding life and hope in God’s abiding love. And let’s seek to spread that love and hope all around our world, working for peace and joy and light everywhere. Alleluia. Amen.

Prayer: Knowledge of You, O God, is so wonderful. We thank you. We praise you. We seek to commit our lives to growing in your knowledge and love and sharing your love and hope with all the world. Show us that way. Bless us in that way today and forever. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen

This sermon was preached as a part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, September 9, 2007 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.