

“A Little Lower Than God” / Psalm 8 / 26 May 2013

When I look at the heavens, the psalmist says, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, what are human beings that you are mindful of them? You have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.” A little lower than God? Glory and honor! How often do you feel glorious, and honorable, and nearly divine? Probably not often...but maybe you should.

One thing (among many) that prevents me from feeling a little lower than God is just all the stuff I don't know. I mean, finally at the age of 43, I've swum just about as far upstream as I can swim in my specialized tributary of knowledge, which is “divinity.” But do I really know anything more about the Deity than I knew when I started? For each new bit of knowledge that I've acquired about faith and sacredness has required me to unlearn things I'd once known to be certain. Besides, even now that I've got these tree velvet bands on my sleeves, I still can't drive a stick shift. I still don't know how to change my oil. I can't seem to get the toilet in my guest bathroom to stop running. I don't know how to prune my lilac bushes so that they'll actually blossom next year. I don't know who the twenty-first President of the United States was. I don't know the difference between a hedge fund and a slush fund. I don't feel “a little lower than God” because there's just so much, so much that I don't know. Isn't that true for you?

I mean, really, did you know that there are 336 dimples on a golf ball? Did you know that there are 118 ridges around the edge of a dime? Winston Churchill was born in a ladies' room during a dance—who would know a thing like that? In advertisements—whether TV ads or in print—the clocks in the background are typically set to 10:10. It's just an old advertising tradition, but who knew? I didn't know until Friday that Al Capone's business card said that he was a used furniture dealer. (My guess is that he dealt mainly in mysterious locked trunks that weighed about 200 pounds.) A dragonfly's lifespan is twenty-four hours. A goldfish has a memory span of three seconds. An ostrich's eye is bigger than its brain. There are more chickens than people in the world. What do we really know when it comes right down to it? Do you know the names of all eight of your great grandparents? Do you know the name of your neighbors four doors down and across the street or hall? Do you know what your spouse is thinking when he or she falls silent? What does your dog dream? We know most of what we need to know for day-to-day life, like how to get to the grocery store and the gas station. But most of us don't really know much about the machines that get us there, or the economic factors that drive our purchases. We know how to do our jobs, our toiletries, our cooking, but which of us really understands the chemical process of how our cholesterol pills work. Even the most informed person among us is profoundly ignorant of many things. Our knowledge is precious, but it's a narrow path through a murky forest of unknowing. All our hard-won knowledge is a string of small islands in a great ocean of unknowing. Knowledge! It's the quest of the ages! It's the word engraved at the ends of some of our pews. Knowledge is the El Dorado the Holy Grail of life; the more you get of it, the more elusive it seems, the more you realize that you lack.

As the Haiti Travel Team was out and about in the mountainous countryside, one of our team members kept asking about a certain hotel with a French name, a place called “Hotel le Cul.” As soon as I heard the name, I looked at our Haitian driver with a little bit of shock and doubt. Surely no one would name a place of business “Hotel le Cul.” The driver suppressed his laughter and respectfully agreed that he'd never heard of the place. Later, with another member of our team in the car, we were again talking about the elusive Hotel le Cul, and this person said, “No, it's Hotel le Recul.” And suddenly it all made sense. “Le recul” means “retrospect” or “retreat.” Hotel Retrospect is a strange enough name, but it's far better than “Hotel le Cul,” which is a crass slang word for a part of the body that cannot be named from the pulpit. Oh, the not-knowing! Ignorance of just a single syllable can make an enormous difference!

The psalmist of old—that ancient poet—perhaps on a night when he is unable to sleep, gazes out at the starlit heavens, the vastness of the created order, and in the unsearchable distances, those stars, the cold, brilliant lights, piercing the purple night. And in a state of wonder, he whispers those

age-old questions that you've perhaps asked yourself: In all the bigness, in all this distance, what makes me think that I matter at all? Am I known to Someone out there? In the great enormity of it all, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, and mortals that you care about them?" Or, as many of us recall these familiar words from years ago: "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou visitest him?" All our great venerable store of human knowledge fails to answer this old, primal question: what do we really know for sure? Are we seen and known? Still the unknowing haunts us, all these millennia after that psalmist's death. Nothing that we learn about the oceans, or the galaxies, or the human body, or the atom, none of our hard-won knowledge even begins to answer the biggest questions. In fact, as our knowledge grows, the questions grow with it. Today, for example, we know at least what the stars are; they're distant suns. The psalmist who first penned his lonely question believed that the stars were holes punched in God's floor, to let the brilliance of the heavenly court send a few spare rays toward the darkened earth. But the psalmist concludes: "Yet, you have made humans a little lower than God and crowned them with honor and glory." And that is a good enough answer. A little lower than God, in all our unknowing? Even on our best days most of us never feel quite so exalted, so honored as to be called a little lower than God. But maybe we should.

Speaking of the unknown, today is a lesser-known holiday called Trinity Sunday. You may have noticed all the trinitarian hymns. It's a day when novice preachers tackle the unwieldy task of preaching sermons about the Trinity. I say that novice preachers do it because if you've ever preached a whole twenty-minute sermon about the Trinity, then you promised yourself (about six minutes into that sermon) that you would never do it again. In fact, this question arose yesterday among some of my dorkier church-fly friends on FaceBook. What do you do on Trinity Sunday? Do you actually preach about the Trinity? Indeed, even today's Psalm could be translated, "You have made us a little lower than God," or it could be rendered, "You have made us a little lower than the gods." That name for God—Elohim—is plural. It means "spiritual beings," implying that (in good Presbyterian fashion) even God is a committee. But the general consensus was no. All of us admitted that the Trinity—though an old and venerable doctrine—just isn't a pressing issue in most people's lives; any sermon about it would raise more questions than it would answer. Make it a topic for the adult Sunday school class, but otherwise, have the humility to admit that you don't fully get it. Besides, a far more pressing question in most people's minds is the one the psalmist asks: In our great unknowing, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them and mortals that you care for them?"

Staring out at the night sky, that long-ago psalmist was asking questions that people are asking still today: Who or what is God? (And if you're not a person of faith, then you probably just replace the word God with the word Reality; what's real?) Who is God? And who am I? John Calvin believed that all human knowledge, all science, all history, all math, all art, all human knowledge is a quest to answer those two questions: Who is God, and who am I?

The former Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, was a historian, and like most people interested in history, he was quite a philosopher about humankind. He said, in the end, "The world has suffered far less from ignorance than from pretensions to knowledge. It is not the skeptics and explorers but the fanatics and ideologues who menace decency and progress." And then Boorstin goes on to name the things in life that he considers islands in the ocean of unknowing, things that give us some real and meaningful knowledge if we will treat them with humility. He says that for life to be meaningful, everyone has to invest himself or herself in a great institution or two, like a museum, or a university, or a library, or some center for the arts, or yes, some historic religious institution. Boorstin names science as an island of knowledge, if it's used carefully and treated with respect, always knowing that no scientific answer is ever final. He names art and literature, insofar as they can tug at real, universal chords in the human spirit. He names love, and family, and community, because these things can all make us better than we would ever be on our own. Boorstin, a semi-secular Jew, names religion as one of our islands of knowledge, for religion—if its certainties are few and modest—is a place where people are encouraged to ponder the deeper questions of life. Faith, too, is a life-giving

quest into the mystery and the splendor of the divine. Faith—the healthy kind—enables people to ask questions like the ancient psalmist asks. Faith, when it's doing its job, doesn't offer us all the answers, but it fills us with wonder and makes us to know—deep within ourselves—that we are indeed God's chosen agents in a troubled and wondrous world, that we are not the worthless worms that some of our hymns have called us, but that we are a little lower than God. Faith is at its best when it causes us to gaze up at the stars in awe, and to experience God as both Mystery and Friend. Then it draws us into God's great work of redemption, naming us as agents of reconciliation in the vast, unknowable plan.

It was that grizzled old warhorse Donald Rumsfeld who said, “As we know, there are known knowns; these are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the things we don't know we don't know.” We used to know that bumblebees should be incapable of flight, but we now know that we were wrong. We used to know that going out into the cold without a coat would make you sick, but we now know that we were wrong. We used to know that it was dangerous to waken sleepwalkers, but we now know that it's not. In the life of faith, we embrace a handful of certainties, but mostly our calling in Christ is to mystery and wonder. The best posture for a life of faith is the one the psalmist takes, staring out at the brilliance of the created order and marveling to know that he—and you, and I—are all privileged to be a part of the plan. As that knowledgeable man, Einstein, said, “There is nothing more beautiful than the mystery of things.” It's a healing thing to put yourself in Mystery's way, to embrace the not knowing and lose yourself in wonder. “When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, what are human beings that you are mindful of them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.” A little lower than God? Glory and honor! Do you ever feel glorious, honorable, nearly