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Sermon—25Jun17
Mt 10.24-39
“Numbers Game”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

This sermon is about God.

There will always be many things that we don't know about God.

After all, God is infinite, and we're limited. God is omniscient. He knows everything, whereas we human beings have many boundaries to what we can know—boundaries around the past, the present, and the future. We can't know what someone else is thinking; we can't be sure about even our own thoughts and feelings.

In contrast, God knows everything we have ever done. God knows our thoughts and our feelings. God knows all there is to know about us.

Jesus expresses this philosophical thought in a vivid way in today's Gospel. He memorably says, “Even the hairs of your head are counted.”

I realize that this fact in itself isn't particularly important. While I might wish there were *more* hairs on my own head, the precise number doesn't matter!

Still, I love this text. I love to think that God knows all about us.

The mere idea of an omniscient God is comforting. After all, we spend much of our lives being misunderstood. Even your closest friend may fail to comprehend the logic of your thinking when you're telling her about some decision that you have made.

Your friend may misjudge you and believe that you're doing something that's foolish. However hard you try to explain your reasoning, you still feel alone.

“Even the hairs of your head are counted.” Although we might feel isolated from the company of our fellow humans, we are never separated from God. As the marvelous Psalm 139 says,

“Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar...Where can I go from your Spirit? where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast.”

I love this Bible passage, too. It demonstrates that people in ancient times—people whose science was rudimentary and who had many superstitions—these so-called “primitive” people could still think profound thoughts about the divine. While they didn't know about molecular biology or astrophysics, they knew some things about God.

Our ancestors in the faith knew that wherever they were on the earth, God could enter their hearts and enter their lives.

And because he is omniscient, God is able to care for us. Whatever we are doing—whether we are sitting down or rising up, God has the most precise knowledge of

us, inside and out. With this knowledge, God is able to help us as we confront the challenges of life.

Of course, there is one consequence of this truth about the nature of God that we might prefer *not* to face. If God knows everything about us, he will know the *bad* things as well as the good.

But if we think about it, even this aspect of God's omniscience is comforting. For since God knows the things about us that we're ashamed of, he can *forgive* them. God can detect the bad things about ourselves that we wish were different, and God—only God—can wipe the slate clean.

And just as we don't have to feel guilty, so we don't need to feel alone. Of course, God can't provide the same comfort to us that human companions provide. After all, God is God.

But God can provide the "blessed assurance" that we are loved and cared for, that our existence matters. We especially receive this assurance in times of prayer, when we sense a presence beyond the material world. Even when we are by ourselves, we don't feel lonely.

This ability we have to feel the presence of God who knows even the number of hairs on our heads explains the strange phenomenon of Christians who voluntarily choose to be alone: *religious hermits*. This movement began in the Church in the third century, when Christians retreated to uninhabited regions of Egypt and the Middle East and set up little colonies of monks and nuns. There are still orders of hermits today in the Roman Catholic Church, and there are even a few Anglican hermits.

The original monks and nuns were known as the "desert fathers and mothers." Each monastic had a little hut or "cell" that they lived in, at some distance from the others! Although the Desert Fathers and Mothers would gather occasionally for communal prayer, they spent most of their time off by themselves.

This hermit life is inconceivable to most of us. Being alone might be a problem to us – but it's certainly not a solution! We prefer to get out and enjoy the company of other people. Even our media are "social!"

But the hermits didn't feel alone—they were *with God*. They learned to value solitude as a way to learn about themselves and about faith.

One story was told of a new hermit who came to the desert and asked for advice. An old desert father replied, "Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything."

Jesus taught something rather similar. He said, "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

The idea is, if you take time to enjoy some solitude, God will teach you new things about yourself. Here's another story from the desert fathers that shows the spiritual wisdom they found.

A brother came to speak to the Abbot in charge of the community of hermits and complained, "Many distracting thoughts come into my mind, and I am in danger because of them."

The Abbot then dragged the monk outside and said, “Open up the garments about your chest and catch the wind in them.” The monk replied, “This I cannot do.”

So the elder said to him, “If you cannot catch the wind, neither can you prevent distracting thoughts from coming into your head. Your job is to say no to them.”

We can assume that the Desert Fathers and Mothers took advantage of their remote locations in the desert to enjoy the beautiful night sky. They would have realized that however many stars there were in the beautiful sky, the Creator of the universe knew all there was to know about them. God has the stars numbered.

And we can be sure that if there are any conscious creatures residing on planets circling these distant stars, God would know them too. If they happened to have hairs on their heads, God would know how many!

So let’s use the solitude we are given to overcome the distractions of modern life. Let’s go into our rooms, and see if they teach us that we are not alone—and that the God who sees in secret will reward us.

Amen.