

**“Recognition Matters”**

**Matthew 10:24-39**

**March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

**Third in Series on “Whose We Are”**

**Pastor Andy Kinsey**

***“Even the hairs on your head are counted.”***

**- Matthew 10:30**

**Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable unto you, our Redeemer, Refuge, and Friend. Amen.

**Message**

When I was growing up, I can remember my Grandmother sharing with me that “God knew how many hairs were on my head.” At the time, I had thick brown hair, and I was pretty sure God didn’t care: Why would God go through the trouble of counting the hair on my head? (Today, of course, I am much thinner on top, and I am glad God knows!)

I believe that what my Grandmother was saying, and what I have come to realize over the years, is that God does know who I am. God is somehow present to me more than I am present to myself. God cares for me beyond what I can comprehend, even to the point of knowing the hairs on my head!

Now to those without hair, I also believe God cares and knows who you are. God knows every bald type as well!

But in all seriousness, when Jesus says to his disciples that “the hairs on our head are all counted,” he is actually saying something very important. Indeed, in light of the present health crisis, which we are now facing, Jesus’ words today could not be more appropriate: The God who knows every hair on our head is the God who is going to be with us when we go through difficult times. The God who counts every hair is the God who cares.

## **Jesus' Teaching**

To be sure, in their original context, Jesus words were geared toward twelve very anxious disciples, as Jesus tells them, in so many words, what they are likely going to face when they go into the world to teach the gospel (Mt. 28:16-20). Jesus pretty much says to them that what he as their Master will face – hostility and rejection, even death, they are going to face (Mt. 10:25). In fact, at this point in Jesus' ministry, he has already received threats on his life (Mt. 10:16).

But Jesus' little missionary message to his disciples is also about something more, and it is a message we need to hear more than ever: three times in five verses Jesus shares not to fear when they go and serve him (Mt. 10:26, 28, 31). And the reason they should not fear is because God's purposes have been revealed: that is to say, God is up to good in the world, despite what evil or danger there is (Mt. 10:26-27). God's purposes will prevail (Rom. 8:28).

That's one reason the disciples should not fear: *God is up to good.*

The other reason the disciples do not need to fear is because God is a God who cares. God is a God who recognizes us and knows us, even to the point of knowing the hairs on our heads, even to the point of knowing about sparrows that fall to the ground (Mt. 10:28-29). God knows us from head to toe. God acknowledges those who acknowledge him (Mt. 10:32).

Now such a confession does not mean that God will prevent us from falling or from facing danger. Rather, it means that *God recognizes us when others don't seem to care and when others may abandon us on Christ's mission.* That's central to what Jesus is saying: *God recognizes us when others don't seem to care or when others may abandon us on the mission.*

## **Reflection on Current Situation**

Now, in light of what is happening in our country and around the world at this moment, such words, I hope, are words to ponder and receive with assurance, but also with a sense of challenge. And here is what I mean: I believe it was Franklin D. Roosevelt who said that, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, "the

only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” To some extent that is true. Fear can paralyze us. Fear can stop us in our tracks.

But who among us can turn off fear like a water facet. Fear is a complicated emotion, on many levels. Fear can lead us to do the heroic, but it can lead us into isolation and paralysis. Fear can build walls, especially when we need to be building bridges.

Therefore, when Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the challenges they are going to encounter, he is saying something very important, and he is actually saying something very important about fear: The logic goes something like this: there is something worse than the fear of physical death; and there is something worse than the fear of public speaking, or the fear of the unknown; and it is the fear of that no one cares for you, or the fear that you don't matter, or that you have been unnoticed or forgotten. Such a fear is worse than death: it is a bear born of neglect.

Hence, Jesus' teaching that we matter, and that God knows us and recognizes us, even to the point of knowing the hairs on our heads. This is what Jesus is saying: God recognizes us and cares for us, even now.

Because if I have a concern about what could very much happen over the next few weeks or months, it is that the most vulnerable people in our society will be forgotten or not recognized – persons who are elderly and socially isolated already, persons who are food insecure, persons who may lose their jobs, persons who are from other countries who are now being scapegoated, families that do not know what to do with children who are not in school.

How will we need to pay attention to what may happen to them? Because God is paying attention and God knows! And if God does, how will we?

If you have not read the article on Friday by David Brooks in the *New York Times* about our present pandemic, I would encourage you to do so, for what a pandemic can do, says Brooks, is a hold up a mirror to us and reveal to us what kind of society we truly are; it will reveal to us who are true leaders are; and if his analysis is correct, and I think it is, from the way past pandemics have gone, what we may see may not necessarily be good, as a lack of compassion can (and often

has) become quite real: The virus will not simply expose a health crisis but a spiritual crisis.<sup>1</sup>

And what I want us to focus on is how we will find ways to keep our souls, our spirits, in tack, and find meaningful and wise ways to stay connected: For the worst kind of death that can come upon us is not physical death, but spiritual and moral death – the kind of death that can occur when we isolate and distance ourselves from others, all in an effort to stay safe, yes, but also with unforeseen social consequences.

I think David Brooks is on to something. Pay attention to what kind of people we could become: a pandemic can kill compassion too. Hopefully, it won't. We will grow and care together, but perhaps this is why the real pandemic needs to be a pandemic of kindness, even now.

It is an insight that I believe overlaps with what we have been sharing over the last few weeks about the kind of church God is calling us to be: that we are called to care for each other, yes, on the one hand, but also find ways to make a difference in the lives of others, on the other. Let me explain.

First, on Friday, the phone rang off the hook about our Soup's On Ministry. Persons were concerned that we were going to cancel. I understand. People are afraid. But what I realized during those calls was that there are folks who need a place where they can count on food and where they have some sense of belonging.

How may we continue to find helpful ways of providing food and/or a place for persons who are food-insecure, all the while considering health safety? That's a question I ask.

Second, in a conversation on Friday with Dr. Clendening, the superintendent of schools in Franklin, I learned what it is going to take to make sure children in this community are fed over the next three weeks, and even months. There are plans in place to help. However, it is going to require money and, possibly, persons who can distribute food supplements in and around the community.

How may we assist on both counts?

Because what I want to stress during this time, and what I sense is really at the bottom of these matters is recognition: If God knows the hairs on our head, if

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, "Pandemics Kill Compassion, Too," *The New York Times* (March 13, 2020).

God watches the sparrow, then God surely recognizes the least of these our brothers and sisters (Mt. 25:38). And if God does, then surely God's own followers are charged to recognize such persons as well (Mt. 25:18-39)!

How may we stay connected and care for each other?

Yes, we will probably have to live-stream or record our messages in the weeks ahead via Youtube and Facebook. We can do that. And we will have to figure out ways of staying in touch with the congregation via different methods of communication. We can do that. But we are also going to need persons to check on others in this church and in the community: we will need persons who can make phone calls and send emails and cards and pray with others. We will need persons to assist and serve, maybe in ways we have not anticipated.

To be sure, these are not big things, but they all add up. Check on the people close to you – even if they get several phone calls, check on them.

For people are afraid. There is a spiral of panic. And people in the midst of all this “stuff” need to know that they matter, that they belong. That's the challenging part of our current climate.

*Therefore, as we go into a time of prayer, may we realize that what God is seeking is really, at bottom, a matter of recognition: Of being a church that is recognizing others. Of noticing what is happening. Of paying attention. Of discerning where the Holy Spirit is leading and doing what we may need to do – to stay safe, yes, but also to listen to what the Lord is saying: that the God who recognizes us and knows us is the God who cares for us and for others deeply – even to the point of knowing the hairs on our heads. Amen!*