

At some level—maybe a different level for each one of us—realizing that God is a God who knows us deeply, who created us, and sees all that we do in life seems truly terrifying.

You're telling me that God, a being with all power and all knowledge knows me inside and out?

We might start to feel like we did as children when we were lying to our moms about something or trying to hide something we had done. Now, I know that no one here today ever tried to hide anything from their mom, right? But let's just say you did. How did that go for you? Because I am betting that whatever you were trying to hide....

Somehow she KNEW!

I would guess, most of the time, your mom shocked you by figuring out exactly what you were up to. And so you would ask her, "Mom, how did you know?!" or more often than not your face would just have that question written all over it.

And so your mom would say back to you, "I knew because I know you better than you know yourself; I know you inside and out, like the back of my hand!"

Wow. That's a scary experience...

Well, in our reading today from Hebrews, we are assured that God does—in fact—know us better than we know ourselves.

Let me share with you Hebrews 4:13 from the NIV translation, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."

So, you see God is the one who knows everything about us and yet loves us still!

But then what about those things that we don't want to have known about us? Those things that we don't want to have seen by God or by anyone else.

Hebrews 4:12 says in the NIV, "The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

God knows what is in our thoughts and in our minds, the emotions that we experience, the times where we are struggling due to stress, sadness, anxiety, grief, depression, or whatever it may be.

And we all have those times when we struggle with those things and want to hide them from God or from ourselves or from the people around us.

Because the thing is in the same way we can rely on God knowing us totally, we find ourselves with the problem of either not wanting to be known by the people around us or maybe wanting to be known but not being truly understood

We find ourselves judged unfairly by the people in our lives, or we are at times the ones unfairly judging others. We can presume to know people or think we understand them when we actually don't.

And this whole complicated mess of not understanding one another is true of many areas in our culture, but the one I want to focus on today is the problem of how we judge people with mental illness or how we are ourselves are judged due to having a mental illness or a loved one with a mental health struggle.

Why am I focusing on that?

Well, I don't know if you saw it in the bulletin last week or caught Advent's Facebook post about it, but this past week was Mental Illness Awareness Week. This past Tuesday was the annual national day of prayer for awareness and understanding for those with mental illness.

Some of us here at this worship service today have a mental illness or have a family

member or friend who has a mental illness. And all of us here at this worship service today will go through struggles with our mental health during the times in our life when someone we love dies or something in our life changes dramatically.

So, all sorts of facets of mental health touch all of our lives in many ways.

Despite the ways that mental illness can touch many of our lives, it can still be difficult to have people know about our mental health concerns or to know that someone we care about is struggling with his or her mental health. There are so many stigmas around mental illness in our world.

So, to take it back to the first theme in our text from Hebrews, being seen by others while having a mental health struggle or having a family member with a mental health struggle can be really hard.

Yet, it doesn't have to be this way. Being truly seen and lovingly understood while going through a mental health struggle is a great blessing.

With this in mind, I want to tell you about a speaker that we hosted for the youth on the first Wednesday night in October.

A woman named Kate from the Johnson County Mental Health Center came to talk to Advent's youth about anxiety and self-care.

We chatted before her presentation, and Kate shared with me that she was so excited and happy to have the chance to speak at a church and that, in fact, all of the professionals from her organization who go out to give presentations are all very interested in speaking to churches and want to involve us in the work of mental health.

Her words made me think back to this summer when I was on the campus of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota taking a class called ministry with persons with mental illness. It was really an incredible and useful course. The professor made time each evening for one or two mental health experts to come in and present on a specific mental illness, so we got to learn from psychiatrists and counselors who both treat people and do cutting-edge research through the University of Minnesota.

And do you know what we heard time and time again from each of these professionals who came in to see us? Each one stood at the front of the room and in the midst of teaching us about anorexia or borderline personality disorder or depression, they each told us, “We need the church. We need faith leaders. The first place that many people come to share about their mental health struggle is in their faith community. You are the first line of defense to help people.”

So, when Kate was here presenting to our youth, I thought back to that experience this summer. Here she was, in a completely different region, telling me the same thing I heard from those professionals in Minnesota. You know, all of this made such a huge impression on me, that here I am telling you about it today.

You see, we, the church, we can be a valuable ally and resource to help address the mental health crisis going on in our world. We have the chance to not only hear and understand one another, but to help reduce the stigma around mental illness.

Kate, the one who presented to our youth, told me later that faith and being part of a church community has what researchers have found to be an inoculating effect for mental health. Our faith lived out in community actually helps us when we have mental health struggles.

While it is not a cure-all, and I am not suggesting that we replace seeing a counselor or psychiatrist with faith, I am telling you that our faith, our life here at Advent as the body of Christ, helps us and those we love when mental illness touches our lives.

How do you think that happens? Well, I believe that today’s text from Hebrews shows us more about why faith and being part of a church helps us with our mental health. It all comes back to being seen, understood, and loved by God.

God seeing us while we have any kind of struggle, including a struggle in the area of mental health, actually gives us an incredible chance to experience God’s deep understanding and love.

For you see, the text in Hebrews doesn’t just stop at God seeing us and knowing every little thing about us—better than even we know ourselves.

NO!

Hebrews goes on to tell us that God looks at us each, each one of you here, with a look of love, compassion, and understanding.

For, Hebrews proclaims to us:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

This is amazing. The creator of the universe, God, come to us in flesh as Jesus is able to empathize with our weaknesses. Jesus was tempted in every way. According to what we read in the New Testament, Jesus went through his own bouts of grief, anger, sadness, and a host of human experiences that all mean he, God, is able to offer us empathy.

And let's be clear here. Empathy is not pity. God isn't pitying us. No. Empathy is understanding the feelings of another and sharing the feelings of another.

God understands and shares our feelings.

This is wonderful news for us. It means that when we go through times of anxiety, depression, grief, sadness, fear, panic, worry, whatever it may be God understands how we feel. If we have a mental illness or one of our loved ones has a mental illness, like depression, an anxiety disorder, an eating disorder, bipolar, schizophrenia, whatever it may be, God understands.

Yes. God understands each one of us, where we are, no matter what we are going through. And is there offering us mercy and grace to continue on, to keep going through our struggles.

Empowered by God we can be individual Christians and a church, the body of Christ, who offer the same kind of empathy and understanding we receive from God to those among us who struggle with their mental health. We can offer not pity to people but understanding. We can do this because we have received and are right now living in God's incredible grace and mercy through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What I would like you to take away as you go out from here is that God sees us and knows us. God sees the mental health crisis that is going on in our culture. God sees the mental health struggles that we are going through ourselves. God sees that person who this sermon is making you think about or worry about.

And God sees with empathy, with deep understanding, sharing in our feelings.

And God gives us to in turn mercy and grace, that is always around us.

So, let's live out God's mercy and grace, through the power of the Holy Spirit, by extending that empathy to ourselves when we struggle with our mental health and to those around us when they struggle.

Amen.