

Sermon, September 7, 2025

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"Searched and Known"

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

After he died three years ago at the age of 96 at his home in Vermont, his obituary in the New York Times called him a "novelist with a religious slant". I mean, really, would you say Julia Child was a little interested in cooking or Tiger Woods went out and played a few rounds of golf once in a while,

To many, Frederick Buechner was the "writer's writer", the "theologian's theologian". I first became familiar with him as an associate over at St. Alban's in Cape Elizabeth. The rector at the time, Jim Adams, was a lover of good writing, so much so that he would take his summer vacations in Iowa and go to the Iowa Writers Workshop. He quoted Buechner often in his sermons, more than any other writer, so often you could smell the wood smoke and maple syrup coming through the text. So I learned to quote him often too. I mean, what the hey, if you can borrow someone else's words, that's less you have to come up with on your own.

What else to like about Buechner? He was converted by a good sermon. After a very successful first novel and an unsuccessful second, he moved to New York City where he began attending Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. Growing up, neither side of his family had a "church connection of any kind," as he put it, but he went because he happened to live next door and "because I had nothing else to do on a Sunday,". One Sunday he was struck by a particular turn of phrase by the church's pastor, the Rev. George Buttrick: "Christ is crowned in the hearts of those who love him and believe in him amidst confession and tears and great laughter." He recounted: "I was so taken aback by 'great laughter' that I found the tears springing to my eyes." He had a desire to go to seminary and study Christianity. Buttrick had his reservations, "It would be a shame to lose a good novelist for a mediocre preacher." Buechner was ordained a Presbyterian minister but never served a congregation. His ministry was through his writing, 39 books which were explorations of the deepest parts of the human soul. His unexpected audience — Christians who sought a vibrant and intellectually honest faith that rejected the certitude of pious platitudes for the mystery of holy ambiguity.

Which is why we're talking about Buechner this Sunday because he labeled our responsorial psalm of the day, "the great Psalm 139, the secret prayer of us all." It's about "hiding and baring our secrets," he said. The psalm describes our deepest

longings for that paradoxical combination of human confession and divine protection that comes from telling God our secrets — I am nakedly revealed before the infinite God, and lovingly sheltered by his intimate love.

The hallmark of his theology was that God speaks to us through the everyday events of our lives. But Buechner says it so much more eloquently than that, let's listen in,

"By examining as closely and as candidly as I could the life that had come to seem to me in many ways a kind of trap or dead-end street, I discovered that it really wasn't that at all. I discovered that if you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living on Rupert Mountain opened up onto extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife good-bye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly. In writing those lectures and the book they later turned into, it came to seem to me that if I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

He leaves a diverse group of devotees from Anne Lamott, memoirist and progressive Christian who said Buechner inspired her "to share that with my readers and to trust that ultimately all we have to share with one another — is our truth in our very own voice,"

At the other end of the spectrum is Russell Moore, former head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, who credits Buechner for making him a better evangelical. Quoting Buechner he said, "If we think the purpose of Jesus' stories is essentially to make a point as extractable as the moral at the end of a fable,"

“then the inevitable conclusion is that once you get the point, you can throw the story itself away like the rind of an orange, when you have squeezed out the juice.”

That’s not how stories work, Buechner taught us. They’re meant to involve us — not just with our minds but with our affections and emotions and intuitions too. And all that points us to Jesus himself, who is the Truth — “the whole story of him.” “So in the long run, the stories all overlap and mingle like searchlights in the dark. The stories Jesus tells are part of the story Jesus is, and the other way round.”

Some final words from Buechner at a younger age

At the age of one hundred, the old man knows what at my age I am only just beginning to see — that if it is by grace we are saved, it is by grace too that we are lost, or lost at least in the sense of losing our selves, our lives, our all.

Geez, that sounds like today’s gospel, All’s lost. All’s found. All moments are key moments. Be still and know that God is God. Before God , all hearts are open, all desires known, and from God no secrets are hidden.