

Youth Sunday 2022

ANNIE BLANKS, *Senior at Athens Academy*

Fully known and fully loved is a phrase I've heard throughout my life. I never really thought anything of it other than seeing it through daily devotionals my grandma forwards to my email everyday. Fully known. And fully loved. Two things humans wish to be. Well, most of them.

Many humans fear being known, but not being loved. And I can tell you, I've been there. And I can also tell you, I have been someone who has falsely accused, misrepresented, and misunderstood someone else. We have all been there.

Over the course of my middle school and high school years, I can definitely say I struggled finding who I was. I've felt the anxiety to go down a certain avenue based on what others had made me seem to do. Freshman year, cheerleading. Sophomore year, trying out for the musical. Junior year, work for UGA Football and Smoothie king. Senior year, I need a nap..

I had eventually realized that my varied interests had taken me to things that conflict with each other. Outside of extra curriculars, I have always been an extremely open minded, friendly, and social person. I am always eager to listen and care for one another, but I seriously struggle with opening up to anyone. If you are like me and hesitate to do so, just realize that there is no shield with Jesus. He knows absolutely everything about you. There are no secrets. You are fully known by Jesus. And that's such a beautiful concept.

I read from a devotional and this really stood out to me, *"The person who matters the most, knows the most. The person whose judgment is all-important, knows all."* Let that sink in. You are fully known. You've never had a thought, you've never had a feeling or sensation, you've never done a deed, there's not been a movement in your body, that Jesus hasn't known fully and completely.

I have come to acknowledge the fact that I have been and I still am searching for my identity.

There are almost 7.8 billion people in the world, and that includes 125,000 people that live in just Athens, Georgia. Just imagine. That many individuals with their own life are also searching for who they are called to be in this world every single day in our small town. Look around in the sanctuary this morning. There are familiar faces, and some people you may be seeing for the first time. But come to realize how each of us have our own life with intricate details, mistakes, and accomplishments. What can we do to help uplift and connect each other? In a world that is extremely torn and so quick to judge others, how can we help unify our community? Even by starting locally or even in your home, how can we help others step out of their comfort zone and become more secure with themselves and their values?

Like the Samaritan woman at the well. She felt extremely prejudiced in her own community of Sychar and all of the women surrounding her pushed her away. They would all go to the well together, spend time together, but they would exclude this one woman. One day, she went up to the well alone, and at the same time, Jesus made a stop at the exact same well traveling to Galilee. The woman was confused, this man was not supposed to be here because Jews weren't even supposed to associate with Samaritans. She was used to the judgment she had received everyday anyway so she kept attempting to push away Jesus' attempt to converse with her and explain to her that He was Jesus himself. She did doubt him at first. But rather than be scared, she engaged in a conversation to learn more. She initially distrusted this stranger, then she thought he was a prophet. BUT she kept open to the conversation, and THEN Jesus revealed himself. She was open to hearing and receiving living water. She didn't let fear or distrust or doubt get in the way. She realized He fully knew HER. He fully knows us. All of us.

One of the articles I read to prepare for today said this about the woman at the well: *"Jesus broke open boundaries in his conversation with the Samaritan woman: the boundary between male and female, the boundary between 'chosen people' and 'rejected people.' Jesus' journey to Samaria and his conversation with the woman demonstrate that the grace of God that he offers is available to all."*

We need to be like Jesus in this situation. Always be there for ANYONE no matter the standard society has set. It is definitely easier said than done when people can still be rude to us, but the best thing we can do is be kind. Be there for your neighbor, friends, family, and strangers. Our world needs more compassion, and it can start with us, even with you. We are all searching for ourselves and we can always pay it forward by helping others in our journey. Let us try to approach each person the same way that Jesus approached the Samaritan woman. With open welcoming arms.

The beauty is knowing we are not alone on our journey. God is alongside each one of us as we go through these chapters of our lives. Not even just alongside us, but he is within us and all around us. You may have relationships come and go with friends and significant others and that's OK. We have God's guidance, grace, and redemption.

Now that I am focusing on college plans, I know it's completely okay to make choices or to try new things because I know God is with ME. At this point it's not too late, truly, it's never too late to keep searching for yourself. We are all finding out things about ourselves everyday. It is so important to know that you are not alone in this. You are getting past that initial acceptance. To know someone is to really love someone.

People are not just one thing, they are comprised of many different things. And acknowledging that in other people and seeing it for yourself is a beautiful example of fully knowing and loving others right in the hope and heart of Jesus.

JULIAN ATTAWAY, *Senior at Athens Academy*

In my 18 years of being alive, I have attended two schools, lived in one city, and met a limited number of people. This summer was the first time that I had a realization that I have not broadened my horizons, and that inspired me to sign up for an adventure called Moondance, an outdoor leadership experience for teenagers. The trip that I decided to go on was to Alaska.

Once I landed in Anchorage, I was honestly kind of sad. I had never been away from my friends or family for so long. Then I realized the opportunity that was ahead of me to explore my faith and see the beautiful place that is Alaska.

On Moondance trips, one of the main lessons they want to instill in their students is to live in the moment. Without the distractions of technology, it felt amazing to be out in nature seeing this beautiful place and listening for God's voice. It gave me the opportunity to really be myself and just let God guide me through this adventure I was partaking in. To be able to soak in what really matters in the moment not only helped me on the trip but has since translated into my life at home. Now, I am more focused on what really matters in life, which is your faith and the things you truly care about, not just random people on social media that you don't know.

A highlight of the trip was the 7-day backpacking trip in the backcountry. This was the part of the trip where I felt the closest to the Earth and to God. I felt as though I was getting the best of what the world had to offer looking at the beautiful mountains and streams that carved through the landscape. The sheer magnificence of God's creation in this place made me so grateful and will be something that I cherish for the rest of my life.

The sheer beauty of Alaska really made me think about our world. It is tragic that some of the natural wonders of the world are starting to diminish and it taught me to soak up what we have.

After going on this trip it made me change my views on what I want to do after high school. For so long I had my sights set on going to Georgia and not really thinking about anywhere else. After meeting so many new cool people it made me realize that there are people like me everywhere.

I want to try and find a place where I can be myself, somewhere where I can be outside. Because when I am out in nature, that is when I can really feel God.

As we grow up, we often hear that our interests will simply be a “passing phase”. My mom had *Hall and Oates*, I had *One Direction*, but those fleeting fixations culminate in a youthful struggle to determine who we are. What characteristics will define us after we exit this transition period? What goals will we strive for? What monumental aspect of our life will consume us? Or even the question I’ve heard a million times this year of what college I’ll end up at?

But through these moments of uncertainty, there is comfort in acknowledging that God will always know us. Even when we don’t know us, He is acutely aware of our greatest desires and simplest worries.

I transferred schools going into the ninth grade. That meant I was entering High School with a blank slate; fully open for me to decide the person I wanted to present myself as. I had just left a school where I felt awkward and out of place. Was I willing to compromise a part of myself to stay afloat all over again?

I know this story is starting to sound like every teen movie, but our experiences often act as microcosms of the social dissonance adults face everyday. Growing up can feel as if you are portioning out bits of yourself to others until you are left with a convoluted perception of your genuine nature.

I decided to keep to myself in my new school: I spent my Friday nights watching movies with my parents, only got involved in the clubs that interested me, and kept a tight circle of friends. I prayed every night, with childlike hope, to be sent a group of friends that would provide me with a net to be completely myself.

I don’t know whether I thought they would be sent by carrier pigeon or God would hand deliver them to my doorstep, but gradually, God delivered. They joined me in my Harry Potter marathons, showed up to every play or performance, and let me listen to history podcasts when I carpooled.

Needless to say, they made an effort to make me feel *known and loved*; just as Jesus knew and loved the Samaritan woman. Jesus makes an effort to avoid condemning her for the trials and travails of her life, but instead calls her to sit with Him. He lets her plague Him with questions and calms her frustration. He has the longest conversation in Scripture with someone who is lost and resentful and scarred.

I often approach God when I am lost and resentful and scarred: when I am having a crisis of confidence or loss of direction. He patiently allows me to make Him my emotional sounding board.

There is an episode of Parks and Rec that I love where Ann is overwhelmingly pregnant and Chris Traeger is running himself rampant trying to solve all of the minute problems. Ann cries at the office Wine and Cheese club because she doesn't care about her problems being solved, she just wants Chris to sit, listen, and say "it sucks". I think we often crave someone to sit, listen, and say "it sucks" too.

My favorite moments of the past four years have often been giving long winded emotional testimonies in my car after practice. My friend and I have switched turns of being the "quiet one", but driving home after those talks have often been the times where God is the most tangible. He places people in our lives to hold our hand and tell us "I understand", so he can show us He knows us by proxy. He places mentors, leaders, friends, or even acquaintances to remind us He is fully cognizant of the path we are on. My hope is that we attract those "gems of people" like moths to a flame, and that we do that by showing the comfort of being known and loved by God.