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Psalm 139

How Do We Love Ourselves?

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Psalm 139 (UMH 854) New Revised Standard Version

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you. O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me— those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil! Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

 Did you know that Mother’s Day has the third highest Sunday church attendance right after Christmas Eve and Easter? There is something within us that says we need to honor our mothers by going to church! Mother’s Day can be a very happy day, but it can also be a very hard day, a day of pain & grief.  Not everyone looks forward to Mother’s Day.  Maybe you have recently lost your mother and you are experiencing the pain of your loss.  Maybe you have lost a child and your heart grieves on Mother’s Day. Maybe you are having difficulties with your Mother or your Mother wasn’t the ideal Mother. Maybe you have bad memories of your Mother. Maybe you were never able to have children and Mother’s Day is really hard.  Maybe you didn’t know your mom. Maybe you are struggling with being a good Mother to your children.  Each of us has been affected by motherhood in one way or another, for good or bad. Everyone here either has a mother, had a mother, is a mother, is married to a mother or knows a mother.

 Whatever emotions today raises for you; I hope that today will be a day that you are able to think about love. Today we are starting a new sermon series where we think about how we love ourselves. It begins with loving yourself as God loves you.

When you imagine God, what image comes to your mind? It is of a grandpa type figure? A tree? For so many people they think of God as like a heavenly Santa Claus, with a red pen and a list, taking careful notes of who’s being naughty and who’s being nice. Some people see God as a scorekeeper, and that image of God is buried deep. It is hard for us to unblock our ears and our hearts so that we can hear the radical grace and love of God.

In our scripture today God is like a mother who loves us. Gail Ramshaw in "God Beyond Gender" reminds us that God is not a rock, or a mother or a father, or a midwife, or a bird, but God is like those things.  We can only gain an understanding of our relationship to God and who God is from comparing our human experience to our relationship with the divine. So, we say that God is like a mother and we say that God is like a father, which in theory sounds great except when that metaphor is not helpful for you.

We use metaphors to describe God’s impact on us and our relationship with God. So, we think of loving qualities that our mothers exhibited, or that we wished they would have, and we see qualities we recognize in God.

We hear in Psalm 139 about a God who knows all and who encompasses all. We hear that there is no place that we can hide from God and God’s love. There is no hiding from God. Now, depending on how you view God that might be a scary thought, but that is really good news. Have you ever seen that church sign that says, “If you feel far away from God, who moved?” God is still in the same place, pursing us, seeking us out, loving us. God is always the one in hide-and-go seek who is the finder. We are the one who hides, but there is no hiding from God.

The psalmist trusts God as a God of justice, a God who liberates those who are wrongly held captive, a God of mercy and steadfast love. We hear about a God who has a hatred for the wicked. The person praying in the psalm feels trapped by their enemies and they are appealing to a God who they know will give them grace and love. Psalm 139 gives us a glimpse into a relationship with God that is personal. God knows me, God cares about me, God seeks me out, God formed me in my mother’s womb, God knows me heart and soul, God knows me inside and out.

The psalm reminds us that nothing, not even death itself, can separate us from God. It is like those wonderful words from the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:38-39, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

We love ourselves by loving ourselves as God sees us, perfectly, without our mask, despite our fears. God loves us for who we are when no one else is looking. I remember when I was in 6th grade I went to choir camp with my church and we had communion where you receive a piece of bread and you dip it into the common cup.  In 6th grade I was not used to receiving communion this way.  I was used to the little chiclet pieces of communion bread and the individual glasses of juice.  So, when it was my turn to receive communion, I received the bread and put it in my mouth.  It sure did taste good!  Then, the cup came around!  So, I took the half-chewed bread out of my mouth and dipped it in the cup! God loves me for who I am, warts and all. The root meaning for the word grace is gift. God’s grace is a gift.

Timothy 1:5 says these words, “Your honest faith--and what a rich faith it is, handed down from your grandmother Lois to your mother Eunice, and now to you!”  I have goose bumps!  If you want to talk about God taking the initiative to reach out to us and get my attention, I need look no further because guess what?  My grandmother’s name was Lois!

My grandmother had diabetes and she was in the hospital when I was born.  My dad snuck me into her hospital room so that she could see me.  My grandmother loved me so much, even before I was born.  She told my mother that she was not going to die until she could see my face.  When I was six months old, my grandmother Lois died.  She was buried on Holy Saturday and I was baptized the next day, on Easter Sunday.  The Bible verse right before the one that mentions the name Lois says these words, “I miss you a lot, especially when I remember that last tearful good-bye, and I look forward to a joy-packed reunion.”

Francis Thompson (1859-1907) was an opium addict, a failure in his career, a man who died of tuberculosis.  He wrote a poem titled “Hound of Heaven” about God pursuing us, and this poem was read by J. R. R. Tolkien inspiring him to write his Lord of the Rings trilogy.  Does this remind you of your relationship to God at any point in your life? “I fled God, down the nights and down the days; I fled God, down the arches of the years; I fled God, down the [intricate](http://poetry.elcore.net/HoundOfHeavenInRtTGlossed.html) ways of my own mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from God.” And the poem ends with these words, “[Save](http://poetry.elcore.net/HoundOfHeavenInRtTGlossed.html) Me, [save](http://poetry.elcore.net/HoundOfHeavenInRtTGlossed.html) only Me?  I am He (She) whom thou seekest!”

Loving yourself as God loves you means remembering that God seeks us out. God knows us and God is with us. God actively pursues us and will not let us get away. May we embrace today how loved we are by God, and may we love ourselves as God loves us.