

“Recognition”

Psalm 139 (NRSV)

Lent III - Wednesday, March 30, 2011

© Kristina N. Heise, 2011

Psalm 139 is a special passage for me. When I read it, it hits so close to home that I often feel I am meant to spend the rest of my life reading these words. I liked it so much that I used verse 15 of the Message translation as the basis of my first article of the *Divinity Digest*: “You know me inside and out, you know every bone in my body. You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit, how I was sculpted from nothing into something.”

This psalm followed me to Chicago when I visited LSTC, appearing in my devotional reading the first night I toured their seminary. I choose Psalm 139 as tonight’s passage months ago, unknowing at the time we would be discussing it the day after I received my official entrance into the ordination process of the ELCA, and the night that the Women of the Church so graciously sponsored a dinner in support of my education. A friend recently asked me to read a psalm at her wedding this spring – I’ll let you take a guess at which passage I’ll be reading.

I’m not entirely sure why this psalm strikes such a chord with me. I’d like to think the Holy Spirit places this passage in front of me at important moments of my life for a reason. Whether or not that’s the case, it’s powerful that of all the psalms to bond with, I connect most deeply with one of the few examples which directly glorifies the intimacy between the psalmist and God.

Psalm 139 serves as a chronology of our spiritual development – a journey of our acceptance of God’s love for us. It explains that nothing about us is ever really a secret from God, who has been with us step-by-step along the way, even before we realized it. This traveling companion is truly omniscient, and when using this psalm as an example for how to build our own conversations with God, we must first acknowledge that there are no secrets between us and our Creator.

Perhaps that’s why when looking at this passage, some people struggle with what appears to be a lack of spiritual privacy between God and our author. The psalmist shares that no matter where he is, or what he is doing, he is never alone.

- 7 Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
- 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
- 9 If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea
- 10 even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

The language in verse ten indicates that the psalmist values the companionship of God, but as we see in the earlier lines, there is no “fleeing” from that affection. In a modern world that values privacy, this sort of one-on-one attention can be a little hard to swallow, even if we appreciate it.

In October, to save money for seminary, I moved back into my parent's house after living apart for them for seven years. Having lived by myself in an apartment since the age of 18, I was used to having things my way. I hate doing the dishes, like to leave a mountain of shoes by the door, have this weird, obsessive-compulsive-thing where I like doors to rooms open and cupboard cabinets closed tight. Both of my parents like my shoes kept upstairs, my mother gets uncomfortable with even a spoon in the sink, and my dad never quite pushes the cabinets hard enough to hear the click of the lock on the door – leaving it open just a crack... It drives me bananas.

Those idiosyncrasies aside, it is rather nice being back at the house. Both of my parents get home from work earlier than I do, so I almost never have to think about making dinner. Laundry is free, there's cable, and no matter how bad it snows, my dad always scrapes off my car for me before I leave for work in the morning. Coming from a landlord who didn't know the word shovel, I have a pretty sweet setup going on at the Heise house.

So you can understand my embarrassment in admitting that a few months back when I was packing up my apartment, I felt a little uneasy. Despite knowing I was returning to a loving, nurturing environment, I was really unsure how it was going to work. They clearly accept me just as I am, so why the hesitation when they offered for me to move back in?

As we grow into ourselves, we realize that we are not infallible but are imperfect. Even with that knowledge, we fear another person may find out about our flaws. Despite the Lifetime Movie Network romanticism of wanting to be truly "known" by another person, it takes a lot for us to admit that someone can see all of our neurosis and love us anyways. Add to it the aspect of someone making the **choice** to live with those characteristics, and we have cause to squirm. We worry we won't be able to shield others from the parts of our personalities that are a few steps short of charming. We worry that when our flaws are discovered, the love will disappear. If we have to share those qualities, then we wait until we have determined the perfect moment to do so.

We've all felt this way when choosing a spouse, a friend, or deciding to admit what moving back home will cost the people we live with, but how do we handle this sort of intimacy with God? All of our baggage is already on the table. There is no shielding, no perfect moment to drop the bomb of reality. Being with us, always with us, there is no way to keep it a secret from God when we lie to our children about our days in college, when we surf the internet on company time, when we pay a bill late, when we skip church because of football game. In this state of total awareness, how can we look past our shame and journey towards God's embrace?

Psalm 139 tells us that we need to stop the pretending and say to God, "Okay, here I am. I know you recognize the real me and love me anyways, and I choose to bask in the glory of that love instead of pretending that I am something I'm not." In theory that sounds easy enough, but today marks the halfway point of a liturgical season where we are reminded that the cost of our sinful nature is so severe that it requires the life of Christ Jesus. We have spent twenty days (twenty-three if you include Sundays) reflecting that we are far from perfect, recognizing a lifetime of bad choices behind us. On those days when we don't even really like ourselves, how can we be expected to wrap our heads around the idea of unconditional love and grace?

The psalmist reminds us that unconditional love is the all inclusive love of our beings – the good and the bad. He explains that this love means connecting to God’s love *through* the darker parts of our personalities, not in spite of them. He shows us that as a result of God’s grace, those qualities are transformed into something luminous.

He says:

- ¹¹ If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night’,
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you

God’s inexplicable affection recognizes the pure spirit within us and will turn our greatest oddities into our most endearing assets. But first, we need be at a point where we can put our trust in God’s love. Our psalmist shows us that point requires acknowledgement of the secrets we are trying to hide. Once we own the parts of ourselves that are dark, odd, atypical and sinful, we can recognize how God continues to speak to us through these aspects, making us individually bright and beautiful.

- ¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Psalm 139 teaches us that in order to be filled with God’s love, we need to embrace with open arms the freedom that comes from recognizing the cost of true intimacy. We have to accept that God was with us when we first developed our eccentric behaviors and when we made bad choices. God was with us when we pushed people away, when we neglected our neighbor, when we shrugged off the kindness of our loved ones. And still, God remains with us, just as we are, recognizing how those experiences knit us bit-by-bit.

As we continue along these final twenty days to the cross, there may be moments when we fear looking at ourselves with good feelings, when we want to avoid entering into prayer because we don’t understand how our mistakes and sins can move us forward. At those moments, we should remember the words of the psalmist that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” We are known, loved and valued. Through God, we are recognized as beings worthy of unconditional love, and unconditional sacrifice. May we step out of the darkness, and reach out towards the intimacy of God.

Today’s meditation is adapted from Maren Tirabassi’s *An Improbable Gift of Blessing*

Gentle Teacher –

We are embarrassed by seeking you.

We are confused by the language of “unconditional love.”
We are terrified of vulnerability,
 and suspicious of anything aimless.
We don’t really know how to believe you love the world,
 and that you don’t question our preconceptions,
 but accept us, just as we are, when we come to you.
Remind us –
God is not an explanation
 God is a wind-blower
 God is a light-giver
 and we are loved.

Amen.

¹ Tirabassi, Maren C.; *An Improbable Gift of Blessing: Prayers and Affirmations to Nurture the Spirit* (pg. 77 & 78, adapted)
United Church Press, Cleveland, OH, 1998