

Our Intimate God

Psalm 139

Jennie Ott ☩ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC ☩ 20 July 2008
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

☩ ☩ ☩

Three weeks ago, fourteen of us from First Church
visited San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala,
a beautiful town nestled in the volcanic mountains
along the shores of Lake Atitlan.

One evening, I was taking a walk around town,
and in passing by a house that was on the side of a hill,
I saw an old Mayan woman
sitting outside her front door.

She was dressed in her traditional, colorful garb
Her dark hair, with its streaks of gray,
was braided behind her back,
and she was at her loom,
weaving a piece of cloth.

Spools of red, blue, and purple threads
hung along the edges of the loom,
and I stopped to watch her,
her old hands deftly moving the thread over, under,
over, under.

I stood there, taking in the beauty of her face
and the beauty of her fabric.

And she must have gotten one of those feelings that she was being watched
because suddenly she looked up.

Her eye caught mine,
and embarrassed, I gave a quick "*Buenos tardes*" before moving on down the road.

I'm still not sure what my embarrassment was.

Maybe it was that I was staring at her while she just went about her daily life.

Maybe it was because I knew there was a good chance
that fabric that took her so painstakingly long
would get a price tag of merely \$15
and sold to a tourist like me.

Somehow though, I think it was that fleeting moment of intimacy,
that somehow she knew that she had moved me,
in the simple moving of her hands.

It was one of those palpable moments between two people,
maybe you've had them,
when the eye contact was just so,
and I knew she had seen me, seeing her.
It was both wonderful and a bit fearful in its plain vulnerability.

I think it's this type of feeling, this type of being seen
that the psalmist so beautifully captures

in this morning's psalm.
Only instead of a fleeting moment,
the psalmist writes of ongoing relationship
using words that whisper
of the profound intimacy and deep vulnerability
of being fully known.

"You have searched me and know me,
You know when I sit and when I rise.
You perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways."

This psalmist writes as someone who has experienced God's presence deeply,
and I think this is why I have always been drawn to this psalm.
It is one of my favorite passages of scripture
and the psalm I turn to when I am tired,
when I am worried
when I think I am not good enough
when I think I am too good to be true.
It's a grounding psalm,
a portrait of one person's faith,
that, quite frankly, inspires my own.

For me, reading this psalm is like discovering a long-lost love letter.
It's peering into someone else's deepest emotions,
an honest-to-God, psalmist to God
bearing of one's soul...

"For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

The psalmist speaks of deep love, not only for God but for the psalmist himself or herself.
It's as if she or he has discovered just how much they are worth to God.
Invaluable. Inestimable. Priceless.
And so they write out of that feeling you get
when you know you are fully loved just as you are,
warts and all,
and out of that confidence and trust you get
when you believe in your beloved.

Resolves the psalmist in those difficult words,
"Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord,
and abhor those who rise up against you?"
Here she declares her loyalty to God,
based out of the unconditional love
and full trust in God that she has.

I envy her, or him, whoever that psalmist was.
I envy their assurance.

This is a beautiful model of intimacy, openness, and unbridled vulnerability with God.
And I know one of the reasons I read this psalm over and over again
is because it speaks to my deepest need –
that desire in core in of my heart, and maybe in all of our hearts,
to be fully known and fully loved,
to place our trust in someone who knows all about us and loves us anyway.

Over the years, this psalm has settled into my bones in such a way,
that's it's not just the psalmist's love letter but mine, too.
God is no longer merely this abstract force out there, somewhere,
working for justice and peace,
but God is near,
a God who knows me better than I know myself.
a God who has told me throughout the testaments –
old and new –
that every hair on my head is numbered.
a God so intimately concerned with me,
that there is nowhere I can go to flee God's spirit.
It's both a wonderful and fearful idea.

When I think of God in this way, I can't help but get specific images in my mind.
I picture a mother God scooping up her children,
fixing up that skinned knee
and singing a lullaby.
I picture a big brother God,
elbowing his buddies, rolling his eyes,
saying, "Look, Jennie's up to her old antics again."
I picture the Weaving God who sits at a loom,
like the Mayan woman
stringing us thread by thread
bone by bone, sinew by sinew
til we're just perfect in the weaver's eyes.
I picture the spirit of God surrounding us,
above and below, behind and before,
as if we walk with a very force field of love around us.

This psalm may have been someone else's love letter,
but in it I can find myself.
And I can find God.

It is no longer an intimate moment only for psalmist and God,
from which I need to avert my eyes,
But it is a love that pours out from the pages,
pours from the images,
that invites me to insert my own name,
to say, "God you have searched me, Jennie, and you know me."

And to be honest, I find myself frequently inserting other people's names, too.
I'm not sure whether or not I'm supposed to do this,
but I do it anyway.
It gives me comfort.
It's a way I pray for other people,

especially folks I haven't seen in awhile
 or don't know exactly what's happening in their lives.
 Take my younger brother Michael, who lives in New Hampshire, for example.
 I'll pray, "God, you have searched Mike and you know him.
 You know when he sits and when he rises.
 You perceive his thoughts from afar."
 I find it comforting to pray this way,
 and honestly, it's good for those days when my brother gets on my nerves,
 because it helps me to remember that he is fearfully and wonderfully made, too.

In fact, I find this a useful practice with many people—
 with people that I'm scared of, or that have hurt me, or that I don't like, or that I don't know.
 Like the man behind my local grocery counter
 who speaks a different language,
 or the woman who is fully veiled crossing by me on the street
 or the pack of teenagers who loiter at the gas station and give me sideways glances,
 or certain politicians or Presidents.

It's helps extend my mercy
 when I remind myself that all of them are woven and known by God.

And I suppose if God knows me, and you, and packs of teenagers, and Presidents,
 Then it's no stretch that God knows little Henry Dana, too.
 He sits right there,
 in the arms of his family,
 and as of yet, he doesn't really talk, doesn't even walk.
 But his value to God is inestimable. Priceless.

Even at just about a year old, Henry Dana is already known and loved and celebrated by God,
 which, if we stop and think about it,
 is really what we're saying in the sacrament of baptism anyway.

In a few moments, William and Rachel will come forward with their son.
 They will make promises.
 We, as the gathered community, will make promises.
 Eric will administer an ancient ritual and an ancient prayer.

And through these actions
 Henry will be welcomed officially into the community of faith.

But this sacrament, like this psalm, is really just a human attempt
 to put into words or practice,
 the amazing, abundant, inestimable, intimate love of God.

This baptism is the visible way that we mark the invisible work that God has already done.
 The work of weaving Henry together
 with the threads of his bones and his sinews
 the strands of his longings and his dreams
 the fibers of potential for all he will become in his life.

It is the holy way that we acknowledge God's Spirit is wholly with Henry
 and that God's spirit will continue to hem him in, behind and before,
 from this day and forevermore.

Yes, our God is huge and mysterious and infinite,
but it seems our Creator is also present and personal and intimate.

That Mayan woman,
 weaving there on the hillside,
 she caught me fair and square.
She caught me drinking in her beauty and the beauty of her handiwork.
She saw me.
 She saw me awed by her.
 She saw me see myself and my own vulnerability.

Yet, it was too much for me,
 too embarrassing,
 so I broke and ran.
And now I can't go back,
 the moment's over; the gaze long gone.

But there is still our Weaving God.
 She, too, is beautiful. And there is much splendor in her handiwork.
 Her gaze is perpetually on me,
 and should I break and run,
 I have no doubt she will drop her weaving and chase after me,
 for where can I go from her presence?

May the still speaking, still weaving God
 fill you, fill me, fill Henry with the knowledge
 and the trust
 that we are fully seen,
 and fully known,
 and fully loved.
Invaluable. Inestimable. Priceless.

Amen.

