

“Known and Loved”

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

Second Sunday of Epiphany/B, January 18, 2009

Lynne M. Dolan

Psalm 139, a portion of which we hear this morning, is one of my favorites. It is a psalm about creation, our own identity within it, and how near God is to it all. It is a very different kind of creation story. Most creation stories speak about the grandeur, beauty and awesome splendor of God’s created order. This is not about mountains or valleys or flowing streams. This psalm is more personal. Here the psalmist moves from talking about Israel as a nation to speaking about the individual. The psalmist talks about an amazingly beautiful and intimate encounter with God.

Imagine what it would be like to experience the level of intimacy described here. Before we were born God knew us. God created us. God knows everything about us, every detail, and every fiber of our being. This can either be incredibly liberating or incredibly intimidating. I can handle a God that knows me from a distance, a God that is safely hidden from me somewhere in the farthest heavens. I can handle a God that looks down on my life from far away. I am not certain I can handle a God that is this intimate.

We spend so much of our time trying to hide from God. If God really knew what I was like, God would not love me, but abandon me. Perhaps there was a moment in your life when you received that message. Perhaps someone said you weren’t good enough, that you did not meet her expectations, that you had fallen short. Some people hold unreasonably high expectations for others, whether it is for a spouse or child or another family member. We live in a culture that values perfection. What happens if you do not measure up to the culture’s standards?

We ought not concern ourselves with the culture’s standards. As people of faith we measure our lives by a different standard. The psalmist sings praises to a God who loves us no matter what, a God that believes in us when we can not believe in ourselves, and a God who has been acquainted with us *not* from the moment of our birth but from a time long before that. It does not matter to God what we look like. It does not matter what we have or have not accomplished. None of this matters to God. Each of us is uniquely and wonderfully made in the image of God. How is it possible to harbor such self-doubt when I have been created in God’s image?

No matter how many times I hear God say it, no matter how many times I hear a loved one tell me, there is always an element of self-criticism that creeps in. One writer asks, “What does it mean to be so intimately and completely *known* by God? Having nowhere to hide is a terrifying thought. We spend so much of our time and energy hiding ourselves from ourselves and others. We spend years cultivating masks and personae because one of our deepest difficulties is self-acceptance and our deepest fear that, if people *really* knew what we were like, we would be hated and rejected, rather than loved and accepted.”

Here is the gloriously liberating truth we receive from the psalmist. God knows us, every inch of us, every experience we have had, every relationship, every success and every failure and in spite of it all God loves us. God's knowledge of us does not lead God to abandon us, but to woo us and call us into relationship, the relationship of a child to an all loving parent. God does not create us so that God can admire us from afar. We are created to be in relationship with God and with God's creation.

Being "fearfully and wonderfully" made is too awesome for us to consider. What would happen if we believed that every human being on the planet was fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image? We hear each day about the fighting and the mounting death toll in Gaza. Every night there are stories about another attack. What if we knew the name of every person that had been killed? To date, this is more than a thousand people, the majority of them women and children. Are they not made in the image of God? What if we knew the name of every person that has been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan since the war began nearly 8 years ago? Not just the names of our soldiers, but every single person, regardless of what side they are on. What if we knew the name of every prisoner being held at Guantanamo Bay? What if we knew whether or not they had children or if their mother anguished over their imprisonment? What if they became more than just prisoner # so and so to us?

Such knowledge is too much for us to handle. We shy away from this. We do not want to know one another that deeply. If we took the time to know one another in this way, our allies and our enemies, we might not have the will to do the things we do. We might think differently about war. We might think differently about violating another person's civil rights. If we believed we are all created in the image of God we could not violate another human being, we could not sexually abuse innocent children, or tolerate child abuse. The psalmist confronts us with the awesome truth that each one of us is fearfully and wonderfully made. This truth stops me short, and it sends me to my knees in the presence of a God who seeks to heal us of our warring ways. We can not hear the psalmist's words and not be transformed.

God not only says "I love you," but God also says, "I know you." We long to hear the words "I love you," however, we are not always sure we want others to know us the ways God knows us. We worry that if people knew us that intimately they might not like us. How often have we found this not to be true? We can not be fully loved until we allow ourselves to be fully known.

When we stop hiding, when we stop listening to what others think and start believing what God says, our whole lives change.

There is evil in the world. There are people who do not live from a place of goodness, who do not value other human beings. There are people who seek to harm us, who wish to destroy our spirits, to rob us of the goodness that is the gift of our creation. Peter Gomes, the Preacher to Harvard University, has written a book about the Bible called *The Good Book*. In one chapter, entitled "The Bible and the Good Life," he describes the

"imposter syndrome" that afflicts us all. We spend our days, he says, in image building, trying to hide our weaknesses from one another, whether in the boardroom, on the athletic field or on the battlefield. We dress a certain way, use body language and speech in a certain way, and even pile up credentials and experience to prove that we are 'good enough.'"

“Here's what Peter Gomes says about that: ‘Well, there is good news, and that is why they call it the gospel. The news is *not* that we are worse than we think; it is that we are better than we think, and better than we deserve to be. Why? Because at the very bottom of the whole enterprise is the indisputable fact that we are created, made, formed, invented, patented in the image of goodness itself. That is what it means, that is how one translates being created in the image of God: it means to be created in the image of goodness itself....Self-worth, self-esteem, self-value, these are not essays in mere ego, these are essays in divinity...the stuff of goodness and godliness itself, and it is that image that provides security and serenity in the world. People may take everything away from you, they may deprive you of everything you have and value, but they cannot take away from you the fact that you are a child of God and bear the impression of God in your very soul. You cannot be destroyed, and that cannot be denied.’”¹

The psalmist proclaims that God is with us at the core of our being, deeper than anything the scientists can measure or understand. This level of intimacy is a sacred mystery. We want to analyze it. We want to dissect it. We want to find some flaw in the logic. It is simply too awesome for us to simply accept. When we allow ourselves to be fully known by others, we understand that such a relationship is a miraculous gift that God invites us to accept. God offers unconditional love and acceptance. We are free to accept this or reject it. God will continue to reach out to us, despite our response.

No matter what happens in our lives, God is there. No matter what we do, God is there. We can not escape God's presence. So often people come into our lives that are anxious to share this kind of intimacy with us. We receive people as friends or lovers who do not see us as we see ourselves. They have been affirmed and loved by God in a remarkable way and they want us to experience this kind of relationship. It is amazing when we recognize the hand of God in such relationships and then begin to live from a place of profound grace with that person. There is nothing more powerful and healing than this kind of love. It is God's way of making God's self fully known to us. This is what the psalmist understood. It is what we might come to know as well if we let go and allow God's love to transform us. May it be so! Amen

¹ Kate Huey, “Known and Loved,” weekly seeds for Psalm 139, January 18, 2009