

Sermon by Rev. Christy Bonner

Sunday 2/1/15

This sermon is based on Psalm 139

I love Psalm 139 and often read it when I am in need of inspiration. Perhaps what is most remarkable about this Psalm is how it places God not only right here with us in our day to day experience, but within us. God is embodied in our bodies, in our minds, and in our hearts. So many times we imagine a God who is out in the world but in Psalm 139 we also realize we can have a personal relationship with God. We have a God of intimacy. In Psalm 139, the Psalmist invites us to imagine a God who loves and cares for every part of us and who knows us so well that God can count the number of hairs on our head. When I was in high school the Bette Midler song, *From a Distance*, was popular. Do any of you remember that song? *From a Distance* is a song that imagines God looking down on us from the heavens. So God is perceived to be far removed from our everyday existence. But in Psalm 139 we read about a God who is aware of our every thought, emotion, and experience. This God is going to be with us whether we are in Tennessee or in Timbuktu. This Psalmist writes so beautifully and says, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? It's such a beautiful description of God's love for us.

And while I love the intimacy of this Psalm, there is a part of this Psalm that is very troubling to me. In fact, in my work as a hospice Chaplain I often edit this Psalm. I use Psalm 139 at funerals, but I leave out certain sections, because no one at a time of grief wants to hear, "O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me... I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies." This part of the Psalm is certainly not easy to hear or digest. But honestly, I like the fact that this Psalmist can write so beautifully about God's nature and then in the next moment show that he is a person who like us struggles to love others the way God loves us. Just like the Psalmist, we are human and we feel anger and we also often fall very short when it comes to loving those in our midst. I want to be clear that anger is a very healthy and important emotion that needs to be expressed and I love that the Psalms encourages us all to give voice to our feelings. But I do think we need to be careful to not let our anger turn into hate. For me the Psalmist words, "I hate them with perfect hatred" is a sign that the Psalmist's anger that has been festering and turned into something unhealthy.

When I was in seminary one of my professors joked that all the psalms seem to say, "I love God... now kill all my enemies."

Like the Psalmist, we can be close to God but disconnected from the call to love those in our midst. Jesus once said that we are called to love God and love our neighbors...and he even went farther and suggested we must love our enemies. But I think sometimes like the Psalmist we get the loving God part right, but we struggle to love people who are different from us. Like the Psalmist we can speak eloquently about God in one breath and then in the next breath we can gossip about a colleague. We can generously write a check to the church on Sunday morning and then rush to beat another person to a parking spot at Sunday lunch. So we must acknowledge the broken parts of us that hate, the parts of us that think we are always right, and the parts of us that think we are better than others. In the midst of our broken places we also are invited to hold onto the hope that we and the world can change.

I often read the daily United Church of Christ Still Speaking devotionals. Does anyone else here subscribe to this?? It is a free daily devotional that can be emailed to you every day and this devotional is written by some wonderful pastors and chaplains in our denomination. All you have to do is go to www.ucc.org and you can sign up to receive the daily devotional through email. About a week ago I received a UCC devotional that was written by Matt Fitzgerald and I'd like to share a portion of the devotional with you this morning because his words fit in nicely with how I interpret this difficult part of Psalm 139. Matt Fitzgerald says:

A few days after 9/11 Jerry Falwell stated and these are his words that he blamed "abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians" for the attacks." Falwell asked himself, "Who scares me? Who do I hate with the darkest part of my heart?"... Like today's Psalmist, Falwell just assumed that if he hated someone God must hate them too.

Matt Fitzgerald goes on to say that just like Jerry Falwell, he also has been guilty of this sin of knowing he is right about certain people, his politics, or his religion. He goes on to say, "The moment we assume our beliefs are neatly aligned with the Divine is the moment we risk a very dangerous idolatry.

(http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_our_disgust_is_a_holy_gift?utm_campaign=dd_jan21_15&utm_medium=email&utm_source=unitedchurchofchrist)

Often we assume that David was the writer of the Psalms because that is what it says in our Bibles. However, the truth is we don't know the writer of the Psalms. UC Berkeley professor Robert Alter says, "The Davidic authorship enshrined in Jewish and Christian tradition has no credible historical grounding. It was a regular practice in the later biblical period to ascribe new texts to famous figures of the past." (The Book of Psalms, xv) The title that precedes each psalm, "To the leader: A Psalm of David," was

added much later, even centuries after David's death, as a way to honor this famous king. So we are not sure who wrote the Psalms and the most plausible answer is that no one person wrote the psalms and instead they developed out of the faithful prayers of a religious community.

(<http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/flunkingsainthood/2011/03/did-david-write-the-psalms.html>)

But even though we don't know the author of this Psalm, what we do know is that whoever wrote the Psalms was human just like David and just like us. Remember, David sent his girlfriend's husband to the front line of war to be killed and yet we know from reading Scripture that God loved David. God loves us too despite our brokenness and sin. God is able to accept the shadow side that all of us have. Like King David, like Jerry Falwell, like the Psalmist we are all both beautiful and broken.

Sometimes it is hard to acknowledge our shadow side and our sin. But like the Psalmist we are guilty of moments where we hate those who are different from us. As the Psalmist expressed his hate in the Psalm today he was likely expressing hate for those who were from a different tribe, a different religion, or a different political worldview. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "Pit race against race, religion against religion, prejudice against prejudice. Divide and conquer! We must not let that happen here." And yet we have let that happen here. America is more divided than it ever has been. In our country today people are dogmatic about politics and religion. There is an air of narcissism that is prevalent in our society. Instead of being right we must love, listen to, and accept those who have a different worldview than our own. If someone has a different political view than us we must resist the urge to be condescending to them and instead love them and recognize that neither side gets it all right. And if someone has religious viewpoints that insight us we must try to love and accept them for who they are.

Today marks the beginning of black history month and just a couple of weeks ago we celebrated Martin Luther King Day. In the midst of the recent racist acts we have seen across our nation and our world it is clear that we need to listen carefully to Martin Luther King's words again. Martin Luther King said:

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Dark- ness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multi- plies toughness in a

descending spiral of destruction. So when Jesus says “Love your enemies,” he is setting forth a profound and ultimately inescapable admonition. Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies—or else? The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.

(<http://www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/mlkquotes.htm>)

And Rev. King was right, we might not like some folks, but we must love everyone. And as we desire the well-being of the people we view in a negative light, somehow that act of love makes them better, it makes us better, and it makes the world better. It is so important for us to consider who it is that we have the hardest time loving and to work at loving who ever we identify by praying for them and engaging with them.

The 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, had the following to say about the Psalmist’s expression of hate in Psalm 139. He shared:

Religious fanaticism appears, that fanaticism which has inflamed the arrogance of Churches, the cruelty of the moralists, and the inflexibility of the orthodox. The sin of religion appears in one of the greatest Psalms...Yet, a change of thought and feeling brings the psalmist suddenly back to the beginning of his poem. He feels quite obviously that something may have been wrong in what he has uttered. He does not know what is wrong; but he is certain that God knows. And so he concludes with one of the greatest prayers of all time: "Search me, O God and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. See if there be any hurtful way within me; and lead me the everlasting way."

(<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=448>)

And so God, search us and know our hearts, try us and know our thoughts. See if there is any hurtful way within us, and lead us in the everlasting way. Amen.
