

Known, Accepted, Challenged, Loved
Psalm 139: 1-12

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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There is an intimacy to this psalm, Psalm 139. Or, rather, the psalmist **describes** an intimacy between us and God. The very first verses. “Lord, you have examined me. You know me.” Think of a medical examination. Wearing that paper robe in the doctor’s office, completely exposed. You can’t hide anything. There’s a **vulnerability** in that kind of intimacy, perhaps it seems uncomfortable. The feeling of being examined.

But imagine that this examination is not about being diagnosed or measured in any way. You won’t receive any statistics about your weight or your cholesterol. Nor is it like any other sort of exam in which you receive a grade. You can’t fail an examination by God. The psalmist is describing being looked at through the eyes of love.

The psalm continues: “You know when I sit down and when I stand up. You study my traveling and resting. You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways.” This is a God who observes us, notices us, pays attention to us.

Many many years ago, a couple asked if I would meet with them to try to help them through a rough patch in their marriage. I don’t do long-term counseling for people - I don’t have the training for that - but this was a couple I’d married, and I agreed to talk to them. They sat down in my office and began to describe a marriage where there was still love, and there was still respect, but there was also loneliness - they described it in different ways, but clearly they both felt alone. It was as if they were living separate lives under the

same roof. They were each focused on their own pursuits, and they had forgotten the habits of intimacy. I remember the wife saying to the husband, "I don't feel that you notice me. You don't really look at me." And the husband said, "You don't seem to listen; you always appear distracted." Neither felt known; they both had become almost invisible to each other. I'm happy to report that this couple found their way back to each other again. They didn't wait too long to seek help. They began spending time together each day, just talking and listening, connecting, re-connecting. Part of intimacy is being known.

It's important for us in our human relationships. It's always a part of our relationship with God.

The gospel of John gives us one of the most intimate encounters of Jesus' ministry. One day while traveling, he went through Samaria, a village in what you could call "enemy territory." Because of an old religious dispute, Jews and Samaritans did not speak to each other, engage in commerce together or care for each other. Until Jesus, that is, Jesus - the one who tore down the walls and barriers between people with nothing stronger than love. Jesus came to Samaria on purpose. One interesting version of this scripture says that Jesus "had to go to Samaria." While there he strikes up a conversation with a woman drawing water from the well. He looks her in the eye and tells her everything about her life. She is, you could say, examined by him - by the one who completely embodied God's unconditional love. That encounter with Jesus changed her from an outcast to an evangelist - she told everyone she knew about this Jesus and his life-transforming good news.

Psalm 139 tells us that God pays attention to our lives - we matter to God. Not in a general way, but in a deeply personal way.

This kind of love brings another gift with it and that is the gift of acceptance. God sees us completely, exactly as we are, and loves us fully and purely.

We like to talk about unconditional love as an ideal to which we all strive, and we see a few examples of it in the human realm. I think of parents whose children have committed crimes. I know of one instance personally - a young man who committed murder. In one horrible misguided moment, he ended a life, he caused innumerable pain for those who loved his victim, and he also altered his family members' lives forever. His parents faced questions, stares, rejection, financial hardship. Yet he was still their son, and they visited him as often as they could while he was in prison. They wrote him letters, sent him whatever small packages that were allowed, and when he was released they helped him rebuild his life. That's an example of unconditional love. Most of us can only come close to the edges of it, but God's love for us is truly without condition. There is nothing we can do to prevent God from loving us.

The writer of Psalm 139 observes that sometimes we might not think we want such intense love and scrutiny. What if we tried to get away from God, to escape? What if we went to heaven? God is there. What if we went to the deepest parts of the ocean? God is there too. There's nowhere we can go where God is not, because God is love.

We are known and we are accepted - the psalm restates this again and again and it's good news for those who feel lonely, beautiful joyous news for those who feel invisible, grace-filled news for those who believe they don't deserve God's love.

Doug and I just spent two weeks in Europe; we had a wonderful vacation in Sweden, Holland and Belgium - seeing beautiful and historic sites like the Anne Frank house and churches that were built over 1000 years ago. There is a Portuguese synagogue in

Amsterdam that was completed in the year 1675. It is still a place of worship, but they have not changed it. There's no electricity, so in the winter time or when there is an evening service, the room is lit with 1000 candles. <https://images.app.goo.gl/pa2JA6iAi8t7wJtR8>. There was only one other couple in the room when we were there; it was quiet. I felt as if I could sense the thousands of people who had prayed in that worship space, during wartime, when they were celebrating births, when they were grieving loss, when they were joyful and when they were afraid. I was moved. I was aware of the presence of God, the presence of divine love, and I felt the ways we are connected to one another in the human family, across religious lines, across time, across all borders.

We also wandered around a few cemeteries and saw several war memorials. There is at least one cemetery in Europe dedicated to unknown lives lost in World War II. So the gravestones do not have names. They simply say, "Known By God." Known By God.

Each of us, known and accepted by the God who created us in God's very own image.

And because this God loves us so much, because God loves the world so much, God gives us talents and gifts and calls us to use them for the sake of the world - spend them lavishly - pour them out generously. Our security may come from feeling loved and accepted, but life's joy and meaning come from living into our purpose, serving others, knowing that our lives have made a difference.

We arrived home late Friday night and yesterday afternoon I came into church to check the mail and phone messages. There was a letter on my desk from one of our mission partners, Road to Hope, which operates several sober living facilities. Our church made a \$10,000 donation to sponsor a new bedroom in one of their new facilities for women and children. The woman who now lives in that room with her two children wrote us a letter. She included her whole name but I'll just share that her first name is Haley. She writes, in part, "With complete gratitude I am the current resident in the home you helped sponsor. A little back story about my family includes a lot of struggles including trauma, abandonment, dysfunction and addiction. I currently have full custody of both of my children, but that wasn't always the case. I suffer from addiction which caused me to be a version of myself I do not like but I do not forget. I lost everything: my values, my morals, my children, my home, everything. Then on July 27, 2020, I decided to get help for my addictions. I moved into Road to Hope and I have been here ever since. This daily battle is not easy, but with guidance from many sources, I am regaining some of what I lost. Road to Hope is helping me get back on my feet. Your love and generosity allow me and my children to have a safe and beautiful home, to build memories, make messes, and be together as one. These walls are filled with laughter, tears of gratitude and hugs every day. This home is a miracle."

Haley has been known; she has felt acceptance and love. She has been challenged to become the best version of herself.

Let us pray. God, you see us, you know us, you love and accept us and you challenge us to live into our calling. For this life and all its possibilities, we are grateful, in Jesus' name. Amen.