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“Fearfully and Wonderfully”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 28, 2010

Jeremiah 2:4–13; Luke 14: 1, 7–14; Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18

Have you been searched and known lately?

Have you flown anywhere recently, and experienced airport security?

You know the drill.

You jettison your heavier baggage at check-in,

fish for an ID, a credit card, or a proof of reservation,

pull your carry-on bags down to security,

show your ID again, your reservation again,

and are eyeballed to make sure that your face matches

the frozen image on your ID;

after which, you are given the yellow diagonal slash of approval.

Then you grab a gray plastic bin, or two, and begin to strip down:

jacket off, belt off, shoes off,

computer out of its carrying case,

cell phone out, camera out,

change out,

metals and jewelry into a cereal-like bowl;

bags on the convey and through the scanner;

gray bins through the scanner;

cereal bowl of valuables over the top.

And then you pray as you walk through the body scanner:

pray that you will appear as airline friend, not foe,

pray that the little puffs of air will not detect any questionable residue;

and pray that the body scan will not be alarmed by either the grommets on your sweatpants or the fillings in your teeth.

For if you happen to be fingered as potential foe,

you likely will be whisked from the line and patted down by a perfect stranger,

while someone else wearing rubber gloves rifles through

all of your personal items and undergarments.

They may search you, eyeball you, scan you, pat you down,

rifle through all of your personal effects,

but do they know you at the airport, as God knows you?

Do they know that airport security makes you feel terribly insecure?

Do they know that you're deathly afraid of flying?

Do they know that you loathe being touched by strangers like that?

Do they know that you're easily addled,

and that if you turn everything out of your pockets on command,

that it's likely that you'll forget to put them all back in properly?

Do they know that you probably just saw your father

for the last time before he dies?

The first word of Psalm 139 is Yahweh. The subject of Psalm 139 is Yahweh.

Seven times in the psalm the verb attributed to Yahweh is "to know".

The object of Yahweh's intimate knowledge is you and me.

The point of the whole psalm is that Yahweh God knows us like no other.

Only God, our Creator, knows, understands and loves

our rich inner lives,

and the delicate patterning that makes us interesting

and uniquely woven:
the past hurts that make us flinch and recoil at unsolicited touch;
the present disordered state of our mind that we usually manage to mask
 until some pressured situation reveals our failure to find the right word,
 or place the right name with a familiar face,
 or to recall a phone number, address, or social security number;
or the future status of our relationships,
 including people about to step into our lives as chance encounter,
 new best friend, or e-harmony future spouse,
 or those about to depart without so much as a wave or a kiss.

These are the kinds of things that Yahweh knows about us,
 which airport security in all its thoroughness will never discern,
 thanks be to God.

Incomplete or partial knowledge is the domain of airport security, face-book,
 the US Government, AARP, the credit bureau, the IRS,
 the adoption agency, the INS, the Nielson polls, and medical records.

Their knowledge is only piece-meal; only a small slice of the big pie.

But to be searched and known by God

 is to be formed, made, woven, knitted, and written about,
 by One who is privy to our secret thoughts, our favorite places,
 our inner dialogues, our heart's desires,
 our allegiances and false allegiances, our pinkie swears,
 our deals with God in the night,
 our panic attacks, our longings, our strange dreams, our deep regrets,
 our unfinished business.

That is horror, at some point, of being searched and known by
 an all-seeing and all-knowing God;

and yet, that is the grace of still being loved by an all-understanding God,
 who knows that we are fearfully and wonderfully made,

and at the same time accepts
that we are also fearfully and wonderfully....flawed.

Our daughter had a scare a few weeks ago.

During a routine medical exam,

her doctor thought he detected a lump on her thyroid gland.

So he sent her, panicked, over to Durham Regional to have a few scans done,

and I went along, also panicked but hiding it as best I could, for emotional support.

The ultrasound scan they did looked like a picture from the moon to me;

a grainy, colorless surface pock-marked with what looked like craters,

that the technician tagged as trachea, or carotid arteries, or
nodules or cysts.

A second scan, a nuclear medicine image that bloomed on another screen

was more fascinating, thanks to radioactive enhancement.

Her little thyroid lighted up on that screen like a beautiful butterfly,

remarkably symmetrical, and sure enough with a tiny white dot

on the lower right wing, just like a black swallowtail might have.

And the butterfly image wowed and awed me into almost an out- of- body experience,

as if I were God regarding one of my creations,

fearfully and wonderfully made from the inside out.

And I thought about William Blake, the poet, and that "Tyger, tyger burning bright",

and I, too, wondered,

"What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

And were I not terrified that this mesmerizing butterfly image on the screen before me

might NOT actually be a thing of beauty,

but rather a harbinger of harm,

I would have continued to marvel at

how fearfully and wonderfully God has made our child:

how complexly knit, how tightly woven, how intricately patterned and formed.

The technicians and radiologists and the endocrinologists may search you and scan you,
palpate you and measure you from the inside out,

but do they really know you, as God knows you?

Do they know that she might have had that particular lesion since birth?

Do they know that I was scared to death that she might have cancer?

Do they know that I was worried sick that her cute new boyfriend might not sign on
for an extended illness?

Do they know that we both worried that her insurance might not cover
any more tests or procedures?

Those are the kinds of things that God knows about us, the psalmist says,
the microscopic things, the invisible things, the hidden things,

the secret things, the idiosyncratic things, the silly things,

the bothersome things, the irrational things, the fears;

those are the kinds of things that God knows about us.

And that is the grace of still being loved by God,

who knows that we are fearfully and wonderfully made,

and at the same time, that we are fearfully and wonderfully flawed.

Were I to translate directly from the Hebrew, verse 14 of the psalm
would read more like this:

"I praise you for fearful things.

I am wonderful. I am wonderful.

Your works and myself, you know right well."

Those fearful things, I think, are our flaws.

God has chosen to create each of us imperfectly, for some reason,
and yet God loves us in spite of ourselves,

and considers us still to be "wonderful, wonderful".

The psalmist says it twice, as if it were too good to be true.

And it is!

The prophet Jeremiah bemoans the sin of Israel, God's beloved people,
that they have forsaken God, the spring of living water,
and that they have exchanged Yahweh's glory for worthless idols
that will never hold water compared to God.

And yet, God will continue to love them in their imperfection,
because they were fearfully and wonderfully made
as holy to God, even in their flawed way of being.

The psalmist has used female imagery to describe God's love for us:

God loves us like a mother loves a child in utero, sight unseen.

God loves us like a knitter loves a prayer shawl,
picking the yarn of particular weight, of warmth of color,
of softness or roughness;
picking a pattern that is challenging, yet will yield
something of great beauty;
praying over each stitch that is cast on or cast off
of clicking needles.

God love us like a weaver loves a piece on a loom,
counting each stitch as shuttles are passed over and under
to make intricate patterns of design as the reed
battens each thread into place.

God loves us like a writer keeping an account of our lives,
recording in meticulous hand-written script
the comings and goings of morning, noon, and evening,
our sittings and risings and lying downs,
our thoughts from afar.

It is interesting that when we get to the New Testament,
and the attributes of God incarnated there by Jesus Christ,
the salient characteristic of Jesus,

his compassion, God's compassion,
comes from the Greek word meaning "womb-love".
Jesus' love for us in our imperfect state is visceral, as if from the womb,
as if from the gut, as if from his heart of hearts.
While we are yet sinners, flawed, imperfect, with dots on our wings,
full of fearful things, God loves us still.
Jesus invites us all to a banquet table where the guests are not the beautiful people,
the spotless ones, the unblemished, the white-washed, the pure-breds,
but rather those with extremely poor taste,
those crippled by social phobias,
those with every lame excuse in the world for their sorry behavior,
those blind to their egocentric and biased points of view.
And yet he loves us, and loves us, and keeps loving us still,
not because we are fearfully and wonderfully well-made enough to go it alone,
but because we are fearfully and wonderfully flawed enough
to need God.
Imperfection should breed trust around the banquet table of the Lord.
The apostle Paul heard Jesus three times say it this way,
"My grace is sufficient for you, and my power is made perfect in weakness.
Therefore I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses
so that Christ's power may rest on me. " (2 Corinthians 12: 8-9)
It's a new year of learning in the church,
when we start again our course of spiritual formation, Christian education,
spiritual nurture, confirmation, fellowship groups, and choirs.
And we always start off the year with this deep desire, I think, to know God better,
to know the Lord's Prayer, to know the 23rd Psalm, to know the Shema,
to know the Great Commission.
But the good news is this: God knows us first.
God knows us better than we even know ourselves.

And God knows us and loves us like no other.

And as much as we would like to think that our primary task is to know God back,
the psalmist leads us to believe that our primary task

is to surrender ourselves to God's higher knowledge and wisdom,

and to open ourselves to God's constant and grace-filled love.

Beyond any desire that we have to know God or be known,

is a God who knows and loves us first, in all our quirkiness, from cradle to grave.

For at the beginning, and at the end of our lives,

God is fearfully and wonderfully with us, loving us always. Amen.