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Psalm 139:1-18

A LOVE STORY

Today's reading from the Psalms offers us a love story. Psalm 139 is a love story. And like most love stories, it is filled with drama and complexity and a fair amount of pain. At the heart of this love story is God's constant, steadfast, unwavering love for us.

The writer of the Psalm is speaking to God and rehearses how God is a constant presence who knows everything about us. "You know when I sit down and when I rise up . . . You search out my path and my lying down." The writer ponders, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there."

Now if this were a human being, we might rightly feel concerned that the person was some kind of creepy stalker. Right? I can't escape this person. They follow me everywhere! But this is not a stalker, but God. And God does not hold us prisoner. We are free to choose whether to turn to God or turn our backs on God. This is where the pain in this love story comes in. God loves us but we don't always love God. We turn from God. We reject God. And this brings pain to us, to other people in our lives, to our planet and all its creatures, and of course, to God.

The writer of the Psalm speaks about how we sometimes turn from God and make our bed in *Sheol*, which means "the pit," or "darkness." Consider the ways we make our bed in *Sheol*, in darkness, the ways you have made your bed in darkness. Maybe with anger or bitterness. Maybe the abuse of substances. Maybe our unkindness toward others. Maybe our selfishness or pride. Maybe through our harmful choices. The human condition is filled with

darkness. There is so much *Sheol* in the news it is hard not to grow terribly discouraged. If the fate of the humanity were left up to me, it probably wouldn't last too long. But the writer tells a different story about God. This relationship God has forged with us humans, this relationship God has forged with *you* personally, is grounded in steadfast love. The writer proclaims that even in our occasions of *Sheol*—of dwelling in the pit—God's love still abides with us and for us. Even in circumstances where you and I might recoil from what we see and detest in one another or ourselves, God nevertheless advances.

That's what Psalm 139 is all about: it is a testament to God's love which always advances toward us. God's love advances toward us not like some creepy stalker, but rather with an openness and a desire for our welfare. Think about your personal occasions of *Sheol*—when you felt shame or guilt or disgust about yourself, when you felt overcome by sorrow, when you were filled with despair about the circumstances of your life. The writer reminds us that in such occasions, God advances toward us with great love.

And we cannot escape this love. The writer proclaims, "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your right hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." Notice, we are not held in God's tight fist of control, but rather in God's loving hand of care.

This is the story of Jesus, when you think about it, isn't it? Through Jesus, God advanced toward us in love as we sat in *Sheol*, in our pits of darkness. And with this unwavering love, God offers us a way through the darkness of our anger, and hatreds, and selfishness, and greed, through the darkness of sickness and heartache and suffering. God's love is given as our companion, our strength, our guide. Psalm 139 is a love story—a story of God's unwavering love for you and for me.

The passage we read from Luke today is also part of that love story, although it surely doesn't sound like it. In fact, Jesus' words to his followers—to you and to me sitting here today—are quite shocking and disturbing. Jesus says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” That certainly doesn't sound like the Jesus any of us learned about in Sunday School!

This is a challenging text for sure. So, let's take a moment to unpack what it means. For us to make sense of this passage, we first need to understand what Jesus means when he says the word “hate.” Rather than the English meaning for “hate” which implies intense loathing, the original Semitic expression used here in this text means to “turn away from” or “to detach from.” Jesus is telling his followers to detach themselves from such loyalties as family members, not telling us we are to loathe our family members.

Ok, understanding this helps a little bit, but, let's be frank, not a lot. Because, family members are among some of our most cherished relationships in life. Family is typically one of our fiercest loyalties in life. Let's consider for a minute the many loyalties and allegiances that are important to us: our families, our communities, our churches, our jobs and careers, our nation. We also have loyalties to our bank accounts and our possessions. And Jesus plucks out one of these examples, one of the best and most beautiful things in our human lives—the family—and uses it as an illustration to say that allegiance to the way of God takes precedence over even the best of human loyalties.

Here is the confusing part. When Jesus talks about our having allegiance to the way of God, he means that we are to have allegiance to the way of love. So how does allegiance to the way of love square with his telling us we have to detach from our family? That seems contradictory.

The family is one of God's greatest gifts to us. Family relationships have the potential to be among the most profoundly meaningful ones of our lives. The phrase we sometimes hear people state, "family first," conveys how important people regard the family. But the trouble is that families are terribly imperfect. Even loving families will display some kind of dysfunction and brokenness. People are sometimes selfish. They hurt one another. They betray one another. And those who stake their entire life's meaning upon this imperfect institution will find their lives on shaky ground when this primary allegiance crumbles or disappoints.

The same is true for all of our other loyalties. When the stock market crashes, when we get laid off, when our dream home goes up in flames, when our revered public figure is brought down by a scandal, where will we find ourselves when our loyalties fail us?

Here is where Jesus' words become part of God's love story. When we detach ourselves from these other loyalties, when we can let go of making them the primary locus of meaning in our lives, then we are able to re-engage *with* them in a new and healthier and more loving way. So let's return to that family which Jesus tells us to detach from. When we make Jesus and his way of love our primary loyalty, we will no longer feel threatened by our family's imperfections. And we will in fact, be far more able to offer our family members forgiveness and grace and love. When we detach from our possessions, we can use our resources to love and serve others in healthier ways. When, as Jesus instructs, we detach even from our lives, when we stop clinging to what is safe, when we stop holding fast to what is secure, then we can truly give our lives away in love. Jesus gives us one of his famous paradoxes: by detaching from the things that claim our hearts and committing ourselves to God's way of love, we will be more able to fully love them as God intends.

And that is how this odd and disturbing passage connects to God's great love story for us. God is always advancing toward us in love. And God desires that we turn and move toward God. But to do that, we must entrust our whole selves to God's way of love. Jesus isn't some seasoning we can sprinkle on our lives to add a bit more niceness to our lives. Jesus calls us to make a full 100% commitment to the Way of Love. Jesus calls us to give our lives over to serving Love. To give our lives over to serving Love.

God writes a love in your life. God's love always advances toward you, no matter whether you recognize it or accept it. God's love is not dependent upon our response. But like any love story, the story is made more beautiful when the two parties advance toward each other. When we turn to God, however, that means we are turning away from other things. Detach, Jesus tells us; renounce everything save the service of Love.

So will you stand with me now and using the reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant found in the bulletin, let us together make our renunciations and let us together make our declaration to give our lives over to God's love.