

The Look of Love

Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24 & 1 John 4:16b-21

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 8th September 2019

There's no escape. This could be your take-away from Psalm 139. "You know when I sit down and when I rise up," O God, "you discern my thoughts from far away" (Ps. 139:2). "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" (Ps. 139:7). One of the Bibles that I often use offers a heading for each of the psalms. These headings are not actually in the original text, they're added by Bible translators to summarize the meaning of the psalm. Sometimes these headings are helpful, but often they're not—and, generally speaking, should be politely ignored and pushed aside, because they often skew the meaning of the text and preempt the individual work required in the study of scripture. The heading given for Psalm 139 is: The Inescapable God.

This heading—The Inescapable God—suggests a God with an all-seeing eye, omniscient, all-knowing, always looking at us. There's no escape. It's a God who sees everything, watching your every move, like Santa Claus, who knows when you've been naughty and when you've been nice. God is "acquainted with all [our] ways" (Ps. 139:3) the text reads. God sees you when you're sleeping and knows when you're awake, who "knows when you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake. You better watch out, ...you better not pout..." someone might be coming to town.

Perhaps this isn't far from your image of God, someone like Kris Kringle, watching, waiting, weighing your actions and thoughts, ever-critical, judging, discerning, separating good from bad. Perhaps that's how you see God looking at you—judging you, watching, waiting, weighing your actions and thoughts, keeping track, writing everything down in a cosmic journal of your life. Perhaps you see yourself with that same critical eye. Perhaps that's how you see others, see things with a criticizing eye. The look of judgment. Never satisfied.

Lots of people—both in and outside the Church—sadly, view God this way. They imagine God looking at them with a critical eye, sitting in judgment by a God before whom one never measures up. It's a moralistic view of God. Yes, God is judge and God judges. However, God is first love—"God *is* love" (1 John 4:16b). So, then, we must be better theologians and ask ourselves what does judgment look like and feel like from a God who *is* love? Love needs to frame the purpose of judgment. *Judgment from such a God has to be in service to love.*

But I don't want to focus on judgment—there's enough of that in the world these days. Instead, I would like to put the spotlight on three words in one verse of Psalm 139 and from these three words, consider the psalm as a whole.

Your eyes beheld... "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance..." the psalmist sings (139:16a). Your eyes, O God. There's something about those eyes that look and then cause to be. Eyes that see into the depths and perceive what we cannot see. Eyes that look and in looking, seeing, perceiving, call us into being. Eyes that love. Love that imagines and sees possibilities

and then creates and calls us into being. God's gaze, in this psalm, is not one of judgment. Sure, the psalmist asks God to search his heart, to judge his sin, remove his wickedness, lead him on a new path. But the one who searches the psalmist, searches with the eyes of love.

Theologically, we could say that our lives, indeed all of creation, exists because right now we are being seen by God, whose eyes continually behold us and in beholding us, sustain us. This means, should God ever stop looking at us in love existence would cease, we would become like dust and vanish into nothingness. It's the look of love that formed us and reforms us. So, yes, there's no escaping that look, this love—*thank God!* There's no escaping this gracious gaze—*thank God!* For that's what love does—love looks, it sees, it calls us to life. Even if we've lost the capacity to see ourselves, God still sees. If we have lost our way in God, God knows where we are. And wherever we are, we are never lost. If we feel like we're lost in the dark and can't see a thing, "even the darkness is not dark," for God the seeing God, "...for darkness is as light" (Ps. 139:12). And if we feel like we're far from God, that's an illusion and a lie. We live within the presence of God. The Christian mystical tradition has always known this.¹ Right to the core of who we are, to the depths of the psyche, the eyes of love can see what is invisible to our eyes. We are held by those eyes.

And we need eyes that see us. We all know how scary it feels when we are not seen for who we are, when we're invisible to others, when we're ignored. We know the sadness that comes with not being seen, especially by people we love, people whose love we crave. We become real in the seeing. There were several times this past week when primal screams could be heard coming from the Child Care Center classrooms or out on the playground, children that crying because they were missing their parents. They couldn't see mom or dad, and, at a deeper level, they were also crying out *to be seen*, seen in the eyes of one who loves them through and through. Every child hungers for this, and that child who was "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14) is still alive in us, no matter our age.

Sometimes we turn away from the one who looks at us in love. Sometimes we don't feel worthy. Or we look away in shame or guilt or fear. Sometimes it's scary to be seen by someone who looks at us in love. We might avert our eyes because the look of love is too much, too piercing, too shattering. Turn away all we like; God continues to see us.

The English poet George Herbert (1593-1633) beautifully describes this tension in a poem he titled [*Love \(III\)*](#). He imagines how God moves toward us:

*Love bade me welcome: (Love, meaning, God. God bade me welcome...)
yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
...Drew nearer to me
sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd anything.
A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.*

Love welcomes. We draw back, resist, reject, refuse. But quick-ey'd Love observing...moves in! Quick-ey'd Love draws near! Quick-ey'd Love notices. Sees. Observes. Knows. Doesn't miss a thing. Pays attention. Isn't that what love does? As the psalmist knew, love pays attention. And we saw this in Jesus' life who loved by seeing those many ignored, by paying attention.

In the movie [Lady Bird](#), released in 2017, we find the story of a young teenager, Christine McPherson, trying to find her way in the world. She's smart, a gifted writer, a little odd, funny, quick-witted, a senior at a Catholic school in Sacramento, and unhappy about living there. She gives herself the nickname "Lady Bird" and dreams about attending a prestigious college in "a city with culture" despite her family's financial struggles, while her mother Marion often tells her that she is ungrateful for what she has. Lady Bird becomes friends with Jenna Walton, a popular girl at their school, who is reprimanded by a nun for dressing inappropriately. So Jenna and Lady Bird vandalize the nun's car with a sign that reads "Just Married to Jesus." Lady Bird is called into the principal's office. It's a remarkable scene. Sister Sarah Joan doesn't reprimand or judge her, but says to Lady Bird, "You clearly love Sacramento." Surprised by that, Lady Bird says, "I do?" "You write about Sacramento so affectionately and with such care." Lady Bird says, "Well I was just describing it." "Well it comes across as love," Sr. Sarah Joan says. "Sure," Lady Bird says, "I guess I pay attention." Then Sister Sarah Joan asks, "Don't you think they are the same thing? Love and attention?"

It's a beautiful film, which ends with an epiphany when Lady Bird steps into worship one morning at First Presbyterian Church in New York City, just as the choir is singing.

It's a profound insight, isn't it? Love and attention are the same. To love is to attend. To attend means, literally, "to stretch," to apply one's mind or energies or awareness to something or someone, some "other." It's a form of seeing. To attend, *truly* attend, requires love. That's what I hear in Psalm 139. Love and attention. *Your eyes beheld me, O God. These eyes of God that love us and attend us, and behold us, and in beholding us, summon us to life.*

That's why the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943) could say, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."² Weil was a remarkable human being—labor activist, teacher, factory worker, resistance fighter, mystic, Jewish, and Roman Catholic. Albert Camus (1913-1960) considered her "the only great spirit of our times."³ She wrote extensively about attention being an essential human faculty that must be acquired and developed, it's an act of contemplation, a form of worship, even a form of prayer; attention deepens our humanity and opens us to the divine. Attention, then, becomes a form of generosity because we stretch out and, thus, we are stretched. Attention frees us to be generous people. "Attention determines what's in focus for us in the moment, so choosing to bring something into focus in that way—whether it's an experience, someone else, or awareness itself—is a form of generosity."

Love and attention. *Your eyes beheld....* "How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!" (Ps. 139:17). Vast, indeed. Love and attention. This is how God loves. And God gives us the capacity to love this way too. To relate to the world, to our neighbor, to ourselves, to God with similar eyes. To see as God sees: with love and attention.

Several years ago, I was introduced to the poetry of Kathleen Raine (1908-2003). Raised in Scotland, a child of the manse, Raine lived most of her life in Northumbria. She said, "Unless you see a thing in the light of love, you do not see a thing at all."⁴ Love is the interpretative lens,

the hermeneutic, if you will. This means trying to see a thing apart from the light of love is impossible. Without love we're not really seeing, what's really before us is invisible. We are blind. To love, to behold, to attend, brings things and people into sharp focus. They become visible, tangible, real, alive. They come into *being*. This is how God loves, as Jesus showed us, and continues to love us and calls us to look with love, to behold the world.

What's requiring your attention these days?

What needs to be seen?

Who needs to be seen, beheld by you?

Where are you being called to look—really *look*—with love?

¹ See, for example, Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and *An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

² Letter to Joë Bousquet, 13 April 1942, cited in Simone Pétrement *Simone Weil: A Life*, tr. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

³ Cited by Maria Popova, "Simone Weil on Gravity and Grace,"

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/08/19/simone-weil-attention-gravity-and-grace/>

⁴ Cited in John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (HarperCollins, 1989), 65.