



You Belong To God

Psalm 139

Rev. Jenny M. McDevitt

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A number of years ago, the Rev. Jeremy Troxler visited a cemetery in the Channel Islands. The cemetery is dedicated to soldiers who died during World War II. The thing is, Rev. Troxler says, no one knows exactly who is buried there. You see, it's the cemetery for the unknown soldiers of the war. There is a gravestone for each one, but there are no birth dates or death dates. There are no names. Even still, those gravestones are not empty. Inscribed across each one are the words "Known by God."¹

It is a remarkable thing to be known by God. It is holy, and, I submit to you, the source of our greatest joy.

We'll be talking about joy for the next several weeks. The Westminster Catechism is among the primary statements of faith upon which our Presbyterian tradition stands. It is written in question and answer format, and back in the day, prior to joining a church, you were expected to memorize large sections of it, and be prepared to answer any of the questions, selected at random, that might be asked of you.

I am grateful, and I suspect most of you are, too, that we no longer engage in that practice. I don't think those questions and answers should be

mandatory, but neither do I think they should be forgotten. Especially the very first question, as it appears in both the longer and shorter versions: "What is the chief end of humanity?" In other words, What is our purpose? Why are we here? Why should we get up every morning? "What is the chief end of humanity?" According to the Westminster Catechism, it is "to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

To glorify God — I don't want to sound presumptuous, but by being here today, by coming to worship at all, I think, or at least I hope, we are bringing glory to God. I hope we all do that at other times, as well, but at a minimum, we do our best with that here each week. But that's only half of the answer. "To glorify God and enjoy God forever." When is the last time you enjoyed God? When is the last time you delighted in God? It's a question we ignore at our own peril.

Recently, a distinguished panel of theologians, including Jurgen Moltmann, Marianne Meyers Thompson, N. T. Wright, and Miroslav Volf, all contributed to a book² centered around one theme: their conviction that joy stands at the very core of the Christian life, and that it is the American church's lack of attention to joy that

¹ Rev. Jeremy Troxler, "Hemmed In," preached September 8, 2010, at Duke Divinity School.

² *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp, 2015.

has contributed to the decline of so many congregations.

Now, sometimes we mistake happiness for joy, but happiness is always fleeting, dependent upon conditions, and joy is unstoppable. It is a state of being. With that in mind, when is the last time you thought about how joyful you are, and how joyful you might be?

Prophets, poets, professors, and pastors of all different varieties — from the Apostle Paul to Saint Augustine, from Moltmann to Mathewes, from Krista Tippett to Ross Gay — theologians of all different times and places and perspectives may differ in their definition of joy, but they all agree on one thing: Joy is not fully possible without both human and divine connection. In other words, joy is not possible without our being connected both to what is happening right in front of us, and to what is happening far beyond us. We'll come back to this in the weeks ahead.

But for today, first and foremost, what we know of joy, we know because we belong to God. **You** belong to God, a God that knows you and loves you, simply because you **are**. Not because of anything you have done, not because of where you live or what you do. Not because of the balance of your bank account or the list of your good works, not because of the depth of your faith or the degrees on your wall. You belong to a God that knows you and loves you simply because you exist.

Never have I heard this better expressed in human terms than by a six-year-old boy named Alex. One day Alex was in the room when a news report came on the television about a bombing in Syria.

The enduring image of that tragedy was a little boy with a head wound. Alex couldn't stop thinking about him, and so he wrote this letter to President Obama:

Do you remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to my home? Park in the driveway for on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English, too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan.

Please tell him that his brother will be Alex, who is a very kind boy, just like him. Catherine will share her big blue striped white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math. And he can smell Catherine's lip gloss penguin which is green. She doesn't let anyone touch it.

Thank you very much! I can't wait for you to come.

Alex didn't know anything else about that little boy. He didn't know his name, or his age. He didn't know his favorite food or his hobbies. He just knew he was a little boy that needed to be loved. That needed a place to belong. Alex didn't know anything else about this boy, but even still, he wrote:

We will give him a family and he will be our brother.

If a six-year-old is capable of this, how much more so is God?

You belong to God. No matter what.

I imagine there are some of you, however, who are thinking "no matter what" applies to everyone but you. That you are the exception to the rule. And so if you are in that place today, remember the cemetery in the Channel Islands. Remember that the truest truth about you is that

that you are known, deeply, by God, and the God who knows all about you still claims you. And remember the promise of the psalmist.

*You have search me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise
up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

If I am being honest, the first thing that comes to mind when I hear “You have searched me” is the security line at airports. I have gone through security lines 18 times this year. I am not an anxious traveler. And yet, each and every time I make it through the metal detector or body scanner, and each and every time my bag makes it through the x-ray machine, I still breathe a small sigh of relief, as if a bottle of liquid totaling four ounces instead of the allowable three ounces might have found its way into my bag unbeknownst to me.

Being searched isn’t always the most comforting thing to think about. It can actually make us feel incredibly vulnerable. Maybe that is why, paradoxically, this psalm shows up in many of our most vulnerable moments.

*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.*

*If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you.*

I have recited these words in a hospital room before surgery. At a bedside right after a death. I have recited these words welcoming a

newborn baby. Saying goodbye inside prison walls.

Because these words reassure us that the God we belong to knows everything about us, from the hairs on our heads to the beat in our hearts, from the mistakes we made yesterday to the good we will do tomorrow...God knows all about us, and in spite of that, no, actually, because of that —God loves us.

You belong to God. No take backs. No exceptions. No trial periods. No probation. You have been searched and found acceptable. More than acceptable, even. You have been searched and found beloved.

Howard Thurman said it this way: “In the presence of the knowing God, we are relieved of all necessity of pretending. This does not mean that our limitations are extinguished and our sins are no longer sins. What it does mean is that in the presence of the knowing God, even our limitations and sins can be dealt with. There is nothing that cannot be understood and dealt with in our lives in the presence of the all-comprehending God.” We are relieved of all necessity of pretending.

While he was in prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem called “Who Am I?” He wrote about the difference between what others said about him and what he felt about himself.

He wrote:

“Who am I?
This man or that other?
Am I then this man today and tomorrow another?
Am I both all at once? An imposter to others,
but to me little more than a whining, despicable
weakling?
They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, you know me, O God. You know I
am yours.”

You do not have to pretend. You are known,
through and through, and whoever you are, you

belong. That is one of God's greatest truths and
deepest joys. May we find joy in it, as well.