Seen, Known, Loved Peace Presbyterian Church

Psalm 139 MLK Sunday

Elizabeth M. Deibert 14 January 2024

It is such a joy today to welcome an eastern N. Carolina colleague to help lead today’s worship. Rev. Dr. Tolo’kun Omokunde and Dawn Marie Omokunde, we are so glad you are here. We are blessed that through Uneeda, we at Peace have become friends with you. We look forward to hearing from you later in this service of worship and in our education hour today on this MLK Celebration weekend. As I thought about what I might preach on today, of course the verse Dr. King is most famous for quoting, Amos 5:24 – let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream” was certainly a possibility. Micah 6:8 is a favorite of many – do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. I thought about 1 John 4, the verses with which we opened this worship, which speak of the beloved community. Words that instruct us about loving one another because we are first loved by God. And as Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer said, “Ain’t no such things as hating somebody and hoping to see God’s face.”

Of course, I could have chosen the first sermon of our Lord Jesus Christ, who quoted Isaiah when he said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to blind, to set the oppressed free.” Or we could have turned to Galatians 3 which tells us “**28**There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The scriptures are full of words about loving our neighbor and seeking justice for all who are marginalized.

But I stayed with lectionary because I thought that even these verses from Psalm 139 teach us how beloved we are – how God sees us, knows us, and loves us – not matter how far we might run or hide. Even if we run straight into fear and hatred, due to mistreatment, as the psalmist did, as many people in our world are doing, God does not stop loving us, but calls us back to a place of being seen, known, and loved.

Today, I want us to see the scripture and not just hear it. I subscribe to a website called The Work of the People. It is full of short spiritual videos, produced by a guy named Travis Reed who has clocked 40,000 hours creating a visual library that explores faith, while building friendships around the table across the globe. We used some of Travis’ films during COVID for Adult Education over zoom, and today we will use this one to both hear and see Psalm 139. The whole psalm is printed in the bulletin for those who want to read it in full, but for now, we will pray: *Speak to us, Lord, for your servants are listening. Teach us your ways. Lead us in your truth. Secure us deeply in your steadfast love, so that love flows out of us for all the world. Amen.* Now watch, look, and listen for God’s word for us today *(Video)*

God has seen us. God sees what we are up to when nobody else looking. God knows how we feel. God knows when we have been hurt by someone. When we have been under pressure, when we have been ignored, when we have been disrespected or abused for something related to our unique appearance or way of being in the world, by our skin color or by who we love, or by any number of things when we have been put down by stinging comments, even from people who care about us. God knows. God has seen.

God is with us in the times in our lives when we think we cannot continue to put one foot in front of the others, when we cannot breathe, when we are grieving what is lost and cannot be found. Christ knows our despair when it seems the world is getting more hateful and reactionary instead of understanding and peaceful. Christ was himself misunderstood and maligned. They spat on him, accused him wrongly, and ultimately killed him. Christ understands the plight of the wounded, starving Gazan child and the fearful, grieving Israeli mom. Christ understands the despair of war-exhausted Ukrainians and Russians under the thumb of Putin. Christ has been with us in our weary years and our silent tears.

The Holy Spirit has marked us as beloved. We belong to God in Jesus Christ. We are secured by grace, no matter who wishes to condemn. No matter how far away we may run, God is still there. We cannot exceed the boundaries of God’s love.

Some of us were born into generational privilege while others were born into generational hardship. Uneeda and Tolokun and I, all Presbyterian, we each a part of the integration of schools in eastern N. Carolina, so we have so much in common as Christ’s people growing up the same region. B ut we are all shaped by our experience of that world and how we fit in, and how safe we felt, and the opportunities and challenges that were involved. Acknowledging that this is true helps us to have an honest conversation about what it means to know that we are all are made in the image of God and are precious in God’s sight and called to love one another.

Our world is so fractured, so fearful, so reactionary. We cannot truly believe in the boundless grace of God – that we are seen, known, and loved by God, just as we are – unless we begin to see that the same is true for every person we are tempted to scorn, to write off as worthless. Whether it is bitterness, dislike or something as harsh as hate, God wants to heal us of that by helping us know how much we (and they) are loved.

# As Dr. King said, “Returning hate for hate only multiplies hate, adding a deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

# So let’s be people of love. But in order to love someone we have to see them. We have to see them for who they are and not who we wish they would be. We have to do the hard work of seeing them for what they’ve experienced and not read their lives through the lens of our own lives. In order to know them, we must be eager to hear their stories, which sometimes challenge our own stories, because the story you tell is from your perspective – it has to be because it is YOUR story. So to love is to see and hear and know and appreciate deeply the life story of another person – even if their story makes you uncomfortable.

# God joined our story by living among us in Christ, being misunderstood and betrayed and killed. We are called to do the same incarnational work with others – to see, to know, to love – and not to count the cost.