

“Celebrating God’s Presence in the Unexpected”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Part of the “Blessings” Worship Series
Edina Morningside Community Church; August 6, 2017

Psalm 139

*O Lord, you have searched 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.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.
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 take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.
For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of
the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for
me, when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.
O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.
Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

National Night Out is a very big deal on our block. It has been led the last several years by Rezek House, a transitional and supportive housing community on our block. The formerly-homeless, mostly young adults of color who live at Rezek have life experiences radically different from my own. They are young people whose lives of hip-hop and single-parenting I do not really know. I make assumptions about their abilities and ideas. While we discussed how this year’s event could be bigger and better than ever, I was skeptical about how many people would show up. I confess that my biases caused me to wonder: could they pull off all that they were describing?

I knew I was wrong on Tuesday night, when hundreds of children and adults gathered at an intersection next to Rezek. There was a giant bouncy house that someone had donated for the night, carnival games and face painting, mounted police, sidewalk displays by local artists, a live demonstration of how to put out a grease fire, a stage with nearly a dozen speakers and musicians of various genres, and hundreds of people lined up for food that Javen and I helped serve. The crowd was very mixed, but mostly African American, young, and poor if I had to guess. Not the sort of people I normally rub shoulders with, to be honest. I didn’t know that *half* these folks lived in our neighborhood! There were so many people that it felt chaotic and rushed, especially in the food line. We didn’t know where we would get dinner for all these folks, but donated items kept coming in waves and we kept trying to find space on the table.

During all this, a woman came with a flimsy paper plate to where Javen and I were grilling hot dogs, brats and burgers. She looked unkempt and mumbled to herself, not making sense except when she asked for two of everything we offered. They were for her sister and mother, she said, who were at home and unable to make it. I made assumptions about her mental health and her trustworthiness, suspecting that she was taking extra helpings for herself (and implicitly, from others). I deliberately stalled in filling her order, hoping she would change her mind or decide it wasn't worth it. You see, I've internalized the lie that poor people are takers and not givers. She had to repeat her request several times before I gave her what she came for.

It was only afterward that I realized what I had done. With this woman, I stood in the place of judging her worthiness to be fed, to receive a meal and the community grace that it represented. Food had been given freely by local businesses, donated to make sure that all could eat. But I felt the need to be stingy with what was a gift, as though I could judge who was worthy to receive. It was like a Jim Crow diner that only served some patrons, and told others to go hungry. It would be like putting up a bouncer here at the communion table, examining spiritual IDs and judging qualifications to approach this meal.

I made assumptions about that woman's life, which by itself is only human. But my *unchecked* assumption had gone further into prejudice against her. I think of myself as an unbiased person, yet I recognize that this is not an isolated incident. Can I tell you the truth? When a minivan is slow in moving on a green light, I see the driver's headscarf and think "of course", because I have a racist assumption that Somali women are bad drivers. When I heard that the person leaving the scene of yesterday's mosque attack in Bloomington drove away in a pickup truck I wasn't surprised, because I narrow-mindedly lump pickup trucks in with Confederate flags and Islamophobia. (And I'm a *professional* Christian!) I live in a broader culture of prejudice, where it is a recognized pattern in our society. We're told to fear people of all kinds: Muslims, refugees, immigrants and people of color, for starters. Depending on your political persuasion, TV talking heads will stoke bias against Republicans, Democrats, elites, hillbillies, the poor, or the rich.

When I recognize my own prejudice and that of this society, I wince to read in Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart." God's presence everywhere at first feels reassuring, but then becomes bracing and uncomfortable. Holding up the mirror to my own injustices, I want to flee from God's presence as the Psalmist says. Let the darkness cover me or let me "take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea", because God knows the evil in me. God knows the ways we've made false judgments and fallen short. God alone is in the place to judge rightly, so we plead for a merciful hearing. "Search me, O God, and know my heart." Know my heart both in the ugliness I am capable of, *and* know my heart's original goodness, its desire for right relationship with all.

God's ways are not our ways—thank heaven—because Jesus shows us beyond prejudice to the realm of God's sovereign love. In the meal that we remember as the Last Supper, Jesus checked no IDs and made no distinctions about who was at the table. Judas the betrayer was there; so was Peter and every other disciple who deserted Jesus. He fed them *all*, giving bread as his body and cup as his blood. He shows us that there is nobody so distant from God's care that we can justifiably, self-righteously "hate them with a perfect hatred". We witness God's perfect *forgiveness* instead at the table of communion with one another and Jesus Christ. This is where we celebrate God's unexpected presence, not just in the contents of the table but also in the sinners, saints, and sinner-saints who approach it. Where, in the imagery of [the Carrie Newcomer song "Betty's Diner"](#), "Despair and hope sit face to face when you come in from the cold." Where all our hearts are searched and known, but we are not turned away for the prejudices found therein. This is where we are fed instead, where we come as imperfect beggars, where hubris is replaced with humility, and where we are sent out those doors into the world again. After feasting on unexpected, undeserved grace at the meal where nobody is turned away, we are sent with a mission to show others the same mercy.

It's not guaranteed, though, and it won't happen by accident, any more than my neighborhood will magically become the singing, dancing melting-pot of Lin Manuel Miranda's musical "In the Heights". I must choose whether the connections that form between diners at National Night Out are just chance encounters or the start of real, vulnerable relationships beyond assumptions and prejudice. What would it take to decide that rather than National Night Out being a one-off thing, I will give my time, energies, and skills year-round to make my neighborhood feel like home for people of all backgrounds? What will it take for us to receive the grace of free forgiveness at this table, then co-create with God the sort of real, vulnerable relationships *here* that neighbors, strangers, and even enemies will know such grace as well? Lead us, O God, into unexpected blessings and the way everlasting. Amen.