

Becoming a Safer Church
Psalm 139: 1-18
Sermon by: Joanne Gallardo
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Psalm 139

¹*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.*

²*You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.*

³*You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.*

⁴*Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.*

⁵*You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.*

⁶*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

⁷*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?*

⁸*If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

⁹*If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

¹⁰*even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

¹¹*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"*

¹²*even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

¹³*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

¹⁴*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*

¹⁵*My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

¹⁶*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.*

¹⁷*How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!*

¹⁸*I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.*

Ideally, many of us would like to think church is one of the safest places one can be. We all know each other, consider one another decent people, and nothing untoward may have happened to us recently, or maybe even ever in a church setting. We're like a family. We've trusted each other with some of our most deeply held thoughts and emotions. We've confessed, we've been reconciled, we've connected with each other deeply.

All of what I said is true. And there is no "but." I suggest an "also." Also, not everyone's experience of church is the same. For some, church has been a place of deep hurt, or violation, or a place where trust has been broken with people in positions of authority or perceived authority. In a less severe fashion, we are not always our best selves at church. Church is sometimes the last place we want to be. Sometimes church is difficult on a number of levels.

What I'm hoping to do in this sermon is have us acknowledge the painful and sometimes dangerous place church has been for some people, the wonderful haven of souls it can be, and how we, as the body of Christ, can make the church a safe place not only for vulnerable persons, but for ourselves, as well.

Our scripture is a famous one. Psalm 139 has been plastered on every children's Bible, every inspirational wall hanging, and every bookmark one has received as a prize for not acting out in Sunday School. It's a good scripture. It reminds us that God has known us even before we were born. It reminds us that us being on this planet is intentional. Our actions, our being, our souls, all are a part of God's intention and design. God knows us well. And there's no getting away from God, as God is everywhere.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made, and in being so, we are vulnerable people. We're not trauma-proof, fright-proof, or even other people-proof. Our children and other vulnerable people know this well. They, out of any of us, are the most open to be deceived, coerced, frightened, hurt, or manipulated into doing the will of someone who seeks them harm. Some of us may have been the victim of people who have taken advantage of our vulnerability at some point in our life.

Not everyone honors that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Our fallen world sometimes treats vulnerable persons as second or third class citizens. We see it in the death of immigrant children at the border, in the assault of persons who may be confined to a bed or to a chair, in the online manipulation of folks with limited incomes, scamming them out of retirement money or social security checks.

It's true that these are extreme examples. But the church (and I am speaking more broadly than our own congregation or denomination) has historically been a place where secrets have been kept, wrongs covered up, and evil deeds allowed to happen. Many people who perpetrate evil deeds claim to be followers of Jesus and many are active in their local congregation.

I want to be clear that I am not saying that bad things are currently happening here, or that I think it will. I'm not trying to be an alarmist, or making us hyperalert with no real purpose. I'm hoping to convey that we should be alert because the world around us is fallen and we are family to lots of vulnerable people. There are those who would seek to do our vulnerable ones harm and it is our responsibility as their spiritual family to be vigilant, proactive, and protective. We as a church have committed to this by voting for our Safe Church policy.

We all know stories of folks who have been abused some way in the church. Either the church served as a cover up for people with malicious intent, or the church knew and didn't want to "get involved," or theology was used as a weapon to have people believing they deserved or needed to put up with horrible things that were happening to them. The church, and please note that I'm speaking of all churches, not just the Mennonite church, has been home to all areas of abuse: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and spiritual abuse.

There is nothing more antithetical to the message and way of Jesus than abuse of anyone. However, in some areas of the church, a harmful theology has sprung out of our own misunderstanding of Jesus, God, and the Cross. And again, we all have heard stories of this or have experienced it ourselves. Abused spouses being told that leaving their spouse is not the

will of God, that Jesus suffered, therefore our suffering pales in comparison. We've heard that children should obey their mother and father, no matter what that mother or father might do or say. We also fall prey to misinterpretation. We hear of Christ's sufferings so we internalize that we maybe deserve that which befalls us out of some misguided sense at trying to understand redemption and the cross.

While we may not be the people perpetrating this theology, I think we owe our children, vulnerable persons, and other persons in our lives the ability to recognize when something is not right. We owe it to ourselves and others to actively say we do not deserve to be harmed or hurt. We need to repeat to our children and loved ones that it is not the will of God to see us abused in any way. We created a Safe Church policy so that we could better hold ourselves and others accountable when it comes to protecting our children and vulnerable persons. Policies help us better understand our role in the community. But we are hoping that this becomes more than words written on paper, or something we know in the back of our minds. It is my hope that committing to be a safe church for everyone involves a collective act of love. And love is time, love is energy, and love is attention.

Love is time. Love is spending the quality time, a precious commodity for many of us, with vulnerable persons in our congregation. Maybe it's a conversation, or inviting a young family over for dinner, or volunteering for Bible School or Sunday School, helping out with Peace Club, or lending a hand in babysitting so some overworked parents can have a night off. It could be offering a ride, or inviting someone over to teach them a life skill like sewing, or gardening. While I know we value our alone and our down time, sharing some of that precious commodity with someone builds rapport and relationship with folks for whom that is everything. With children and other vulnerable persons, relationships connect them with others outside their immediate family and homes, and help them establish a place for themselves in the world. While this comes easy for some, it's more difficult for others. Loving someone enough to spend time with them shows them the very meaning of "church family."

Love is energy. Like time, energy can be spent in a number of ways. At the beginning of the school year, we received names of children in our congregation we could pray for throughout the year. Energy could look like

letting them know they're being prayed for, sending a card or a trinket to them, or remembering celebrations like their birthday, Christmas, or Easter. Energy could be celebrating a milestone. Energy could be honoring a prayer request or an announcement shared. Energy could be going to an event, be it a play or sporting event, showing people that what they do and what they find joy in matters.

Love is attention. This is an important part of love, and a commitment we must all make for our Safe Church policy to be actualized in our congregation. Paying attention to vulnerable persons involves us listening to what they're saying and not saying. Children, for instance, don't always know how to say something is wrong. It can come across as frustration, anger, isolation, or in other emotions that may not "fit" the situation. Love is trying to see what's behind the emotion. If both time and energy have a person feeling understood, they are more likely to open up and share about things that may be confusing, scary, or strange to them. Of course this applies to children and vulnerable persons who may be abused sexually, physically, or emotionally, but it also applies to the ups and downs of development in their cognitive journey, emotional journey, and spiritual journey. Investing that attention in a person shows they have people who care about them besides those in their immediate family, and also demonstrates that there are safe places outside of their immediate family. And if you're a good example of attention, a vulnerable person can better understand what "bad attention" looks like.

As pastor of Faith Formation, it is my desire that the spiritual life of people in this congregation change and grow in ways from across one's entire life span. We are constantly changing and evolving as people mentally and physically, and I believe it is the same for each of us spiritually. Our spirituality and ability for spiritual growth is also tied up in our safety. When we feel safe, when our needs are taken care of, when we have a community of people we are in relationship with, we can thrive. But when trust is misused, or our safety is in question, or when we feel violated in some way, our spiritual growth can come to a halt. We cannot do the work of the church if our vulnerable people are feeling unsafe.

I also know that these conversations are being had at home. Parents talk about good touch, bad touch, who is a trusted person, where to go for help,

how to say no, and how to ask for what is needed. I would like to stretch us and say that we as a congregation, as the spiritual family of vulnerable persons, have a responsibility to see after the safety and protection of the most vulnerable among us.

One of the ways I would hope we could go about this is through training. Today during second hour, Brenda Yoder will be here in the sanctuary to talk with us about what it means to be a safe church, and how we can protect people in our care here on Sunday mornings and in the general life of our congregation. While we highly encourage folks who volunteer at Berkey to attend, you may be thinking that it may not be “for” you, but I would encourage you to attend anyway as someone committed to seeing spiritual growth continue to happen for every person at Berkey. If you are a Sunday School teacher, there will be another hour long session (same session) led by Brenda here at the church on March 3rd at 4pm. If neither of those times work, the session will be recorded and given to you to watch on your own time.

I believe that both talking about difficult matters in regards to vulnerable persons and taking the time to educate ourselves is challenging, but to do so shows our children and others that we care about them. It also shows we are investing some of ourselves in them in order to keep them safe. We are honoring our psalm by recognizing that everyone is fearfully and wonderfully made, as well as fully and completely known by God. We also do this knowing that there is nothing that is hidden from God, and that shining a light, even in some of the darkest places, brings to our sight that which is holy and also that which is not of God. With the help of the Holy Spirit, our teacher, we can better learn ways that are holy, helpful, and safe.

As we enter this week, may we pray for, connect with, and appreciate those with whose care we’ve been entrusted. May we pray for God to help shape their lives, keep them from harm, and come to know and understand the love and care of God.