

WGUMC November 3, 2013 "in God the Father"
Psalm 139:1-18

I was reading an article recently about "Big Data." That's the term for describing the massive amounts of information collected by big computers and stored on multiple servers to help government and industry do all kinds of things, such as spot business trends, prevent the spread of infectious disease, and search for terrorists. It also enables them to analyze a whole lot of personal information about you and me. Now I don't even want to know that Amazon knows which books I'm likely to buy. So, I sure don't want to know what the NSA knows. With more and more of our lives becoming digitized, it's getting pretty creepy to think about how much "they" know about us.

Yet, we've long known that God knows everything about us. Psalm 139 says it: God knows when we sit down and when we rise up. God knows our thoughts before we think them and

our words before we say them. You could say we have a Big Da Da instead of Big Data.

But thinking about how intimately God knows each of us can be a little unsettling. I was googling around on the internet the other day when I ran across this comment from someone who sounds more than a little unsettled:

Personal God=Stalker God who has way too much time on his hands. I'm glad my human stalkers have to work and worry about their own lives from time to time...Having a God like that would drive me insane.

[<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090823061514AAeHzuL>]

Evidently, some people think that believing in a personal God is insanity, but I have another word for it: "Christianity." In our series on the Apostles' Creed, last week we talked about the first two words, "I believe." Now we'll tackle what we believe. We don't believe in God the Stalker. We believe "in God the Father." To unpack this, there are two words we need to look at here: *God* and *Father*. We'll look at them separately, and then we'll put them together.

To say we believe in God is first to say that we believe in something bigger than ourselves. In classical Christianity, this is God with all the omni's: omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. In other words, God is very unlike us. Our God is transcendent, far above and beyond us. God is very, very big and has to be, because we have some very big problems.

But the truth is that we have a hard time believing in such a big God. Our tendency is to make God smaller and more manageable. So we measure God with our little brains and try to define God with our measly words. We make God into the "little g" god of our family, our tribe, our political party, our country. But we all know that God is bigger than that. God isn't a Republican or a Democrat. God isn't even an American. But you wouldn't know that to listen to us sometimes. Here's the problem: What we want is a god small enough to serve us, but then we get a god that is too small to save us.

So, it's important for us to remember that God is GOD. St. Anselm said that God is the greatest being that could ever be conceived, far greater than our language and our labels. But even our greatest conception of God can't touch the greatness of God, because God's ways are always higher than our ways and God's thoughts are much higher than our thoughts [Isaiah 55:9].

That's the classical case for God. But is this very big, very great God, a God we can know and love? How do we relate to an Omnipresence anyway? What we need is some kind of connection between the "omni's" and little ol' me. What we are lacking is a relationship between the God who is supposed to be Love and Me when I'm not feeling very loveable.

That was my problem back in high school. I told you about my spiritual turmoil as a teenager last week. I told you about the English paper I wrote. It was actually a series of letters to the Apostle Paul. And in one of them, I confessed, "I believe in

God in a universal sense, but I do not believe in myself." In writing that, I realized something: it wasn't enough to believe in God if my conception of God was so far above me that I wasn't able to believe that this God could actually love me. I needed a God that wasn't just universal, but also personal.

And that's what the Apostles' Creed offers to us: a God who is also a Father. Now by definition, "father" is a personal term. You can have a relationship with a father, even if it isn't a good one. I'm blessed to have a great relationship with my father. Still, I hesitate to give God a gender. Gender is another box we put God in.

Besides, I know enough about the way language works to know that if you call God "Father," you don't just change the way we look at God, you change the way we look at fathers. Calling God "Father" brings God closer to us (a good thing) and it also brings fathers closer to God (maybe a good thing). It's wonderful when God acts like a Father, but not so wonderful

when fathers start acting like gods! Maybe that explains the treatment of women in the ancient world, who lived under the thumb of their fathers. Come to think of it, maybe that explains the treatment of women in that part of the world today. For this reason, I have feminist friends who prefer to call God "Mother." That's fine with me, as long as they understand that they are substituting one set of psychological baggage for another!

No matter how problematic our God-language can be, I still don't want to give up on a personal God. Psalm 139 isn't a psalm about a stalker. It's a song about a father. It's about a God who, in spite of knowing everything about us, never gives up on us. If we try to run away, God goes after us. If we hide in heaven or in hell, God finds us. Even to the farthest limits of the sea, God will go with us, leading us, holding us. If we take the wrong path, God will make it right. If we choose to live in shadows, God will turn our darkness into light.

Our Father is a God we can relate to, a God we can pray to and give praise to: "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...." [Psalm 139:13-14a] So you can see how our Father God has seen us and believed in us from the very beginning, even when we couldn't believe in ourselves.

So do we believe in this God who is our Father? And, if we do, what does it matter? To answer those questions, let's put the two together. We said that we have to believe that God is far beyond us so that we won't make God look just like us. But we also need a God who is a Father to us so that we can dare to believe that God loves us. And—this is important—only when we love God as our Father (or our Mother) can we love others as our sisters and our brothers.

This is where it really matters. This is where everyone can see whether our deed really matches our creed. Believing in

God the Father means that we have to love others, no matter how hard or how risky that may be. And in that sense, the skeptics are right. Believing in a personal God can drive us insane. Because a personal God makes some very personal demands of us. And anytime we try to love others just as God the Father has loved us, we are likely to go crazy. But on this All Saints' Sunday, I remember the saints of the church (long past and in the pew) and think: we may be crazy, but we're in pretty good company!

So, I hope you will join me in saying: I believe in God who is far above and the Father who is the Author of love. I believe in a God who transcends all human experience and at the same time is willing to descend into our most desperate, horrendous experiences. I believe in a God who is personal enough to know and love me and at the same time big enough to save me. I believe in God the Father. Amen.