

A Sanctuary of Love
Psalm 100, Psalm 139
December 29, 2024
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As I close out my time as your Senior Minister, I thought about what I wanted to share with you this morning. I found myself thinking about all of the love that has surrounded both Pat and me over our time here. You embraced both of us in a way that just naturally happened over our first few years together. I guess we grew on you and you grew on us.

What we all created together, with God's Spirit so clearly in this place with us, feels to me like a sanctuary of love. Now, sanctuary can be defined in many ways. However, I prefer how one biblical scholar put it: "a sanctuary is the sacred space where the line between the divine and the human realm becomes blessedly, dangerously, thin."

The Hebrew word for sanctuary is *miqdash*, which means "sacred place." According to the *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, sanctuary in the Bible is "[a] holy place where God is present. In the wilderness, this was the tent of meeting; in the time of Solomon, it was the Temple at Jerusalem." [1] You might remember that in Advent, I talked about the Priest Zechariah, going into the inner sanctum of the holy of holies, where God was thought to be present on Earth. Zechariah and the other priests were frightened because they thought that when they got too close to God, they might die. and yet still went into the holy of holies to make sure that the oil was burning and was pleasing to God.

For the people of ancient Israel, the holy of holies was the sanctuary, the sacred space where the line between divine and human became thin. With the arrival of Jesus, as we know, God moves beyond the holy of holies. God walked and continues to walk among us, making that thin place, even thinner. And, it doesn't matter if you are here physically in our sanctuary or in your home, when you pause and include God, you are embracing that thin place where God's Spirit dwells with you.

This is "A holy place where God is present" and God's love fills the space and fills us. This is a place of healing – healing the wounds each one of us has that life has brought to us. At its core, that is one of the things love can do – provide healing, especially when love is unconditional.

When I was in seminary, I came upon Psalm 139. The images it contains helped me to heal from some of the wounds life had brought to me, and some of which I had, quite frankly, imposed upon myself. It helped me to forgive myself and to forgive others for whatever they did to me. By letting go of my anger, my hurt, my internal dislikes of myself, I found amazing healing. By using Psalm 139, I found a new relationship with God – one that brought me to that thin place where God's Spirit touched mine more deeply.

Psalm 139 was read at my ordination. It was read at my installation as your senior minister. I have used it as I have taught seminary students about living and dying and I

have included it here from time to time during our worship services when I have felt called to remind us that God does search for and God knows us.

The image for my ministry which came out of this psalm, has been God holding me in God's hand and God's heart. That image came to me as I have sought to hold all of those, including all of you, whose paths have crossed mine in my heart and as I hold you not only in my heart, but also in my hands. By God upholding me, I have had the strength and the courage to uphold each one of you. This psalm holds and upholds me. I pray that in hearing it over the years, or even when hearing it today, it has helped to remind you that God knows us so intimately that no matter what we do, good or bad, right or wrong, wise or unwise, God has known us since before we were born and will know us beyond our life here on earth and loves us unconditionally.

A sanctuary of love comes from our being willing to open our hearts to God and to receiving and giving others God's love and acceptance. When we make a joyful noise, praising God and showing care for others, that love deepens and flourishes. Caring for others, and not just for ourselves, can change us and it can change our world.

A sanctuary of love is like the heart of God. It's the place where all feelings, both good and not so good, are taken in, without judgment. Those feelings, both good and bad, are sent back out by God filled with love. As I thought about it, we have been through so many things together both positive and also very sad. Together we grieved the death of a young child. Together we have grieved the deaths of so many people that we love who were our spouses, our parents and our children and loved by us. This sanctuary of love has held us in our grief and in our joys.

This place of unconditional love is pretty amazing. As I mentioned during my Christmas message, we are called to align the deepest longings of our hearts with the great and beautiful dream of the heart of God. This sanctuary of love has been a safe place that has enabled us to bring the deepest longings of our hearts to Jesus and has brought us closer to the heart of God.

God has searched us and God known us. God discerns our thoughts from far away. God is acquainted with all our ups and downs and walks with us, even carries us, when we are unable to carry ourselves. When we make a joyful noise to God, when we allow God into the deepest pains and joys in our hearts and lives, God rejoices, because God's love has grown and blossomed within each one of us. Both the pain and the joy are welcome.

Here in this place, God is. Here in this place, are we, God's people – open to understanding anew all that God has in store for us as we step out into this new year, this new time, this new part of our journeys, this new chapter in FCC's life. God is with us and God has got us and we never have to fear because no matter what, God is not going anywhere. Whether we are picturing this sanctuary from afar or walking in that door, God is with us. And when we walk out that door, God is with us.

So, when you feel lonely, or disconnected, or aren't sure that God is really nearby, come into this place, this sanctuary of love and you will find it embracing you and upholding you and filling you with peace, with shalom. This sanctuary is the sacred

space where the line between the Divine and human has become and will remain blessedly thin. This sanctuary is all of us, seeking to draw closer to God and to each other. This sanctuary of love is open to all. May it remain so and may that thin place between us and God never ever disappear. That, of course, is up to each one of us – to keep that sense of God’s heart and God’s love growing with each and every passing day and passing that love on to each and every person not only who walks through this door but who you encounter in your life. May God continue to bless and be present in this Sanctuary of Love.

[1] Rachel Wrenn, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/theology-and-interpretation/sanctuary-the-bible-and-clarification>