

God and Self  
On Relationships Sermon Series  
[Psalm 139:1-18](#)  
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Change is really hard, isn't it?

It's so hard.

Now, some of us find change more challenging than others. My spouse Will likes to tell the story of the time, when he was in kindergarten, his parents rearranged the living room furniture.

He cried for three days.

Change is often very hard, whether you are five or eight-five years old.

It's been a year of upheaval at First UCC. Pastor Todd running for election and winning and entering the legislature. Pastor Lauren joining our staff. And now I've introduced a big change into the atmosphere of this community. I've announced that I'm ending my ministry here on June 30.

I made this decision partly for personal reasons. This move will bring Will and me much closer to our families and to friends who are like family. It will allow my mother to downsize and Will and me to live in a beautiful house in a city we love. And I'm making this change partly because of my sense of call, and what I need for myself and my wellbeing at this time, although I can't share too much about that part yet; things are happening behind the scenes. Stay tuned.

I want you to know it was an incredibly difficult decision, among the hardest I've ever made. I've been one of your pastors for six years. Six very heartfelt, meaningful, action-packed, rich, mutually transformative years.

As Pastor Todd wrote, "Pastors become a part of the fabric of a community over time. And when a ministry comes to an end, there's a gentle unwinding of that fabric" that needs to be done. That process is just beginning.

So this is not a farewell sermon. There will be time for that.

This is a sermon in a series that Pastor Lauren and I planned, titled “On Relationships.” When we picked this topic, I wasn’t quite sure how the timing might work out with the announcement of my news, which has been brewing inside me.

You know how the air pressure drops when a stormfront is coming in? It’s felt like that inside me recently. There’s a relief that comes with the rain. It’s cathartic, like tears.

Ultimately, I think this week’s sermon theme and scripture speak well to the moment we’re in together. It feels right to talk this week about the relationship—the Covenant—between the Self and God, because, let me tell you, I’ve been reckoning with God at a profound level recently.

In my mind, that’s what personal discernment is all about; what it really means: *reckoning with God*.

See, when you’re coming face to face with your own life, your own future, your own next steps—it’s lonely work.

You can process with people you trust, you can share aspects of the decision-making with others who are impacted. But at the end of the day, when it comes to your own actions, your own choices: no one can know, *really know*, what’s right for you but *you*.

Now, if you’re a person of faith—by which I mean, a person who wants to be in relationship with God - the Holy, the Sacred, the Mystery - whatever it is we name that force which is greater than ourselves—you are inviting something else into your lonely deliberations. And this becomes Holy work. It is your deep calling to God’s deep.

I’m going to resist anthropomorphizing God here, as if God were an actual conversation partner who can give advice and direction. The God of our Scriptures sometimes behaves that way. I’ve read and heard stories by people who experienced God this way. Maybe some of you here have had such encounters.

But I think that for many of us, in this postmodern world of ours, this particular expectation that God reveals God's own Self in such a fashion is no longer helpful or meaningful.

There was a time, long ago, when the assumption of God's power and presence completely dominated the imagination of Western Civilization. It was all but impossible to be an atheist. Intellectually, emotionally, culturally—there was no context for such a notion.

Now, the opposite is true.

Even though most Americans claim to believe in God, I would argue that in truth, God has become more of a cherished idea than the living Holy One who is to be sought after and trusted and loved and feared and railed against and acknowledged day in and day out as the Maker and Redeemer of all that there is.

Functionally, I suspect most of us live and work and strive as if God isn't real.

We live our daily lives as if we won't encounter a burning bush or an angelic messenger or a savior at any moment because, in all likelihood, we won't. Not literally.

The burning bush, the messenger who talks to you—these are ancient images birthed from ancient cultures that don't translate, exactly, to our present moment.

And yet what could still translate, if let them, are the promises that our Scriptures make to us. Promises about the nature of God, about what God wants for us and for the world.

Psalm 139 is one such promise. It portrays a relationship between the Psalm writer and God that is so intimate, so close.

*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.*

Some scholars have pointed out that not all people would find these words comforting. Indeed, there is something terrifying about this level of scrutiny, this level of knowing.

To live unto God with this profound disclosure of self would be like someone having access to your medical records, your Internet browsing history, your TSA full-body scan, your childhood diaries, your innermost secrets, your hidden shame, your deepest longings, your most embarrassing stories, and, and, here's the kicker, *still loving you*.

Not in spite of all this knowledge, but *because* of it, because they are your creator, and you are their creation. You are their work of art.

*You are fearfully and wonderfully made.*

You are the sculpture, the drawing, the painting, the pottery, the poem, the music. You are the achievement, beautiful and complex and sublime, conveying a meaning that only you can convey, containing a mystery that only you can contain. God made you—not for a reason, I I would say, because that implies that God pre-ordaining every move we make like a divine screenwriter and you know I don't think like that—but in creating you, God expressed some aspect of their divine image that could only be reflected in you.

And God loves you for that.

In a Facebook clergy group I'm a part of, someone posted and asked, "If had the sum up the Bible in one sentence, what would it be?" (Because that's what pastors like to talk about on Facebook.)

And a colleague named Krista Betz responded with this: "God loves you, so act like it."

Isn't that great?

The Bible, in one sentence: God loves you, *so act like it.*

The poet Elizabeth Bishop wrote, "Someone loves us all," and I don't know for sure if she was talking about God, but who else would be capable of a grace so wide, so encompassing, so indiscriminate?

Sometimes I think that the sole purpose of the church is to help human beings get it through our thick heads that we are, each and all of us, precious and unrepeatable, and then to help us act as if we believed that, collectively. It is hard to accept that such grace is available for ourselves, not to mention each and every one of our neighbors, including the ones who don't look or behave exactly as we do.

What would be possible if we really believed that this grace were true? If we believed, in our bones, that God loves us and won't give up on us? What decisions might we make, what changes might we endure, what challenges might we overcome if we took Psalm 139 to heart?

Maybe faith isn't about knowing God, but trusting *instead* that God knows us. Maybe faith is not about seeing clearly, but rather the sense of being seen, fully, no matter what. And that is where this sense of covenant begins: the covenant between Creator and Creation, a contract with no expiration date, no small print, no unexpected clauses.

*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.*

There is nothing we can do to violate the terms of God's love.

When we lean into that promise, as individuals, as families, as communities, things that seemed impossible become possible.

When I finally arrived at my decision, after much agonized wrestling, I had a rather extraordinary experience. It was like a clenched fist inside my chest suddenly relaxed. Even as I felt scared about what the future might

hold, even as I anticipated the grief at sharing this decision with all of you, I felt a shifting within myself. A calming. A settling.

I could name that sensation God. I could name it the Spirit. I could name it so many things. Part of me doesn't want to give it a name, because I don't want to limit that mystery. God hems us in, according to Psalm 139, but I don't want to hem in God. I don't need to know exactly what's happening; I just need to know enough to trust my gut, even when it's scary, to listen closely to that still, small voice speaking. Whose voice is it? Does it matter?

We are entering a time of transition now. It will be strange and bitter-sweet and sad and loving. Throughout, let's help each other remember:

Change is hard. But God loves you. Act like it.

Amen.