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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Psalm 139:1-12

July 19, 2026

"In Search of Heart Knowing"

Always such a pleasure to join in worship at FCCOL. This congregation has played such a central role in my spiritual life and continues to be such a support with our work addressing homelessness. Thank you.

When I have the chance to preach, I turn first to a set of reading called the lectionary that has readings assigned to each Sunday of the year. From the readings assigned to this Sunday, I was immediately drawn to Psalm 139.

My bookcases at home are filled with books about God and the many, many hours I have spent reading them have helped me find ways to think about God that differ from the theology I was taught as a child that saw God as judging, distant and demanding of sacrifice. With the help of David Good and so many amazing writers, years of reading, discussion and thought brought me to a very different—and profoundly transformative—way of thinking about God.

And the same time, I increasing sense that even the most profound concepts of about God do not, on their own, allow me to experience the depth of God. God's mystery defies definition. Whatever we can say or think about God can never fully unlock this mystery.

But I increasing see that there is a type of knowing beyond thinking and concepts...a profound type of knowing grounded in the experience of God. What they mystics call heart knowing.

We know this distinction between concepts and experience in our daily lives. For example, concepts cannot exhaustively define what love is...and yet we can experience love in profound ways beyond concepts. At a more mundane level, concepts cannot fully capture what makes a sunset beautiful or mangos delicious or why a piece of music bring us to tears...but we can deeply experience each of these things.

Experiences of God can be elusive and even when we have them, they are hard to put into words. We come closest to communicating something of experience, I think, with images, metaphors and poetry.

I see this use of poetry to convey what is, in a sense beyond words, in the beautiful Psalm 139 we read for today.

Poetry that points to the experience of being deeply known by God

"You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways"

Poetry that points to the experience of God's presence in every moment

"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,”

Poetry that points to the experience of God sustaining us in every moment

“You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me
your right hand shall hold me fast”

Poetry that points to God’s irrepressible love as a light which nothing in the world can overcome

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

This poetry moves me to seek out these depths of God for myself. I long to share the experience from which this poetry arises.

The Psalmist was not, of course, alone in turning to images, poetry and metaphor to capture something of an experience of God.

As some of you know, I am increasingly immersed in the mystical tradition which is deeply grounded in mystery and profoundly open to experience as a pathway to a deeper union with God. For the mystics, ancient and modern, God is deeply mysterious—beyond concepts--and at the same time a vivid reality experienced from within.

To share one additional compelling metaphor, I would pull in the writings of Julian of Norwich who lived in the 1300s. Central to the revelation she shares in her work *Showings* was experiencing God as mother. She writes: "Our Savior is our true Mother in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come."

What a remarkable image, especially in her time.

God as “Mother” and all the rich associations and feelings that evokes.

“In whom we are endlessly born” our life endlessly emerging from God.

“Out of whom we shall never come” our connection to God that can never be lost.

With the thinking/analyzing part of our mind, we can study motherhood, break down and catalogue the components that Mother includes.

But we also have heart “knowing” of mother from our own experience. This kind of knowing evades our effort at definition and yet this is the kind of knowing that shapes us to our core. It is this heart knowing that I seek.

I believe the Psalm and Julian when they point to God always being present within us. I believe God love is always holding us. I believe God’s energy is continually birthing us into new life in every moment.

But what I’m most profoundly seeking in my current spiritual journey is greater connection to the kind of heart knowing that is even deeper than believing.

How? Many paths. One path that is increasingly compelling to me is stilling the mind to help open the heart to this deep knowing.

Not easy to do. I have found one helpful practice in contemplative prayer. I'm honored to have my friend Mary Villa, who facilitates a week contemplative prayer group at CT College, here to share a bit about this form of prayer

From Mary

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you about a type of prayer that has enhanced my Spiritual life.

This is a different way of thinking about prayer. We are not talking to or thinking about God. We are not asking for this or that. This is about being with God. In Christian meditation, we pray by becoming silent and still. We come to learn that the Spirit of God dwells in our hearts and can be found in silence.

From Psalm 46: "Be still and know that I am God."

From Psalm 62: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him."

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is at the heart of Christian Meditation. We can say this because at the Last Supper, Jesus said he was sending His Spirit to be in you.

Deeply rooted in Christian tradition; this is the recorded experience from Apostolic times down to our own day. Jesus demonstrated the contemplative mind more than he taught it; for example, when he went off by himself to pray in solitude in the mountains or in the desert. Early Christians trying to follow the example set by Jesus would often spend time in silent prayer and contemplation. St Paul wrote in Romans 8:26: "We do not know how to pray, but the Spirit prays within us." What this means in today's language is that before we can pray, we need to learn to become still, to become attentive. Only then can we enter into loving awareness of the Spirit of God deep within our heart.

The task of meditation is to bring our distracted minds to stillness, silence and attentiveness.

The technique is Buddhist. It is important to sit with good posture and to sit still. Physical stillness helps to quiet the mind. Then close your eyes lightly. Breathe calmly and regularly. One method to quiet the mind involves a mantra or prayer word. Hear yourself saying it in your mind and in your heart, gently but continuously throughout the period of meditation. Or you can simply pay attention to your breathing. Do not think or imagine anything—spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, keep returning to your prayer word. Christian meditation encourages us to wait in silence upon God. And when God breaks the silence, often in unexpected ways, we respond faithfully and lovingly.

For best results, integrate Christian meditation into your daily life. Ideally meditate each morning and evening for 20-30minutes.

After meditating every day for a while, you may begin to notice some subtle changes. A spouse or family member may notice that you have become calmer; perhaps you have more patience. In addition to the well-known health benefits of meditation, the rewards for taking up a daily spiritual practice such as Christian meditation are the Gifts of the Spirit, which include: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, and gentleness.

For me, Christian meditation provided the missing dimension of my spiritual life. It has brought me so much peace. Early on, I began noticing that I craved the silence of meditation and I cherished periods of silence throughout my day. If I missed a session, it felt like a loss. Christian meditation has helped me to better understand the actions and experiences of the Spirit of God in my life. Think about it if you will. And thank you for listening.

Contemplative prayer is, of course, only one path to heart knowing and there are many others.

What helps us walk any of these paths toward a deeper experience of our union with God is, I think, cultivating an attitude of trusting openness. I may not yet “know” in the deepest heart sense, but I can approach the journey with hope, openness and trust.

And second, I think, is a commitment to set aside time-- even if it is just a few minutes a day-- to try to let go of whatever pulls our attention away from God’s mysterious presence within and around us. At least a few minutes a day to try and make ourselves more fully available to the God who longs to be known.

I’m still on the path... the depth of heart knowing I long for still eludes me. But I sense glimpses as I walk the path and the gift of these experiences is enough to keep me searching.

Amen