

Knitting

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Several years ago, my good friend, Kelly, and my mother-in-law both decided about the same time that it would be a good idea for me to learn how to knit. I'm not sure how two people who knew me so well could be so wrong, but nevertheless, I thought I would give it a try. Now, I've never been very "crafty." I simply don't have the patience. But the two of them somehow thought that knitting might be a great way for me to relax. Kelly bought me a kit to knit a scarf and my mother-in-law even went so far as to begin the scarf for me. So, I looked at this scarf and thought – how complicated can it be. Maybe this really will be relaxing.

Well – not so much. They both greatly underestimated my propensity to be task-oriented. I just wanted to get the project done, which I think defeated the purpose of knitting, which for people who actually enjoy it, is really about the process. Many years later – this is the fruits of my effort. If any of you would like to take over – feel free. Because I am clearly NOT a knitter.

This, however, is a prayer shawl that was given to me by Clara Heibeisen. As you can see, it's beautiful – it has uniform stitches and straight edges. It even has this scalloped edge, that I have no idea how she managed to create. Clara clearly has the patience it takes to create something beautiful. Clara, clearly IS a knitter.

So is God.

And fortunately for all of us, God is a knitter like Clara – not like me. God is a God of patience and perfection and beauty. God creates scalloped edges and intricate patterns and unique designs.

In Psalm 139 we hear the words, ***“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. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.”***

The people I know who do enjoy knitting do much of their knitting for other people. And I imagine that as they painstakingly knit away, they are also thinking about the person who will receive the gift. The idea behind the prayer shawls is that while they are being made, the knitter is praying for the person who will eventually receive it.

I think that's the way it is with God, too. When I think of God knitting me together, I love the idea that not only did God take time to form me, to painstakingly put together each stitch, but that God also dreamed about me and made plans for me.

I love this image of God as a knitter – a God who has taken great care to intricately weave each of us together. This is the image of a God who takes time to form each stitch. This is a God who beholds our unformed substance and imagines a beautiful and unique design. Think about the Norwegian sweaters that many of you own – they come in a variety of beautiful patterns and designs. They clearly take time to knit them together. But as one seminary professor notes, “Anyone can learn to knit a Norwegian sweater – (well, almost anyone) – but only God can knit a Norwegian – or a Swede or an African, a Korean or a Russian.”

Or a child with special needs.

And here is where last night's sermon ends and today's begins. I had intended to preach about how each of us is knit together in our own unique way, with our special calling. I was even going to weave in Martin Luther King, who we honor tomorrow.

But I just couldn't preach that sermon. Because you see, last night, I ended up having a conversation with an amazing mother of a child with special needs, who had no idea that I had just preached on Psalm 139. As we talked, in one of those God-given moments, she brought up “that verse about being knit together in your mother's womb” and questioned what it meant in light of her child's challenges. ***Does God really knit together children in such a way that they will face life-long challenges and pain throughout their lives?***

I was stopped cold. Because in spite of the fact that I am not a Bible literalist, I was preaching about this Psalm in a literal way. Because I loved the idea of God taking the time to carefully craft each stitch and have dreams and plans for me. This was a comforting thought for me. In many ways it let me believe that I don't really have any flaws – they are just part of my unique design. Like God had hung on me one of those tags that you find on high quality natural fabrics – flaws are naturally occurring.

But, what do I do with the question: ***Does God really knit together children in such a way that they will face life-long challenges and pain throughout their lives?***

And here is where the metaphor breaks down for me. Is God a knitter like me after all – dropping a stitch here and there, creating a less than perfect design – which would make God careless or impatient? Or does God intentionally weave disabilities into the design in such a way that some people suffer throughout their lives – which would make God cruel?

Or is there another option? When we go back to the creation story, I think that we see that there is. In the first creation account, on the sixth day, when creation was completed, God looks around at all that had been made and says it is very good – not perfect, not even complete – but very good. And in the second creation account in Genesis, God involves man in the process. Man names the animals. Man tills and keeps the garden. Man is given the ongoing task of caring for creation.

What we see in these two stories is that creation is very good, but not necessarily perfect; and that the creative process continues – it is an ongoing process and we are a part of it.

This fall, the **JustWomen** group studied a book called *Creation Untamed*, and one of the things that we discovered is that many of the processes in the world that we see as destructive are in fact necessary for life to survive. Things like volcanoes and earthquakes and hurricanes are a natural part of the way the earth was put together in order to sustain life on an ongoing basis. Without them, our planet could not support life. And the very same processes that can lead to cancer or birth defects are necessary in order for life to exist at all. The world was not intended to be static – which would be safe, but ultimately not life-giving.

And while much of the time that process works really well – a baby is born and we count 10 fingers and 10 toes and proclaim them perfect – sometimes they don't. We no longer live in Eden and sometimes things go wrong, either as a result of our own doing or as a result of living in an imperfect and broken world. And we can rail at God and ask why God doesn't intervene, but the truth is, most of us wouldn't want that. If we want God to intervene in one situation, we would need to be OK with God intervening in all things. Ultimately that would take away from who we and the world are created to be. And God loves us and the world too much to let that happen.

God has created a world where there is randomness and wildness and risk – but also beauty and wonder and surprise. God has created a world where a child born with a less than perfect body, is still very good, is still fearfully and wonderfully made, is still a delight to the eyes of God – and to her parents, and to those of us who are willing to open our hearts to see the wonder of all of God's children.

And so, the question I was ultimately left with, is: *If we are all made in God's image, how do those children and adults with special challenges, who struggle throughout their lives, reflect the image of God?*

- Perhaps they show us the God who also suffers. And I don't mean just the suffering of Jesus on the cross—which in itself is enough, but the on-going suffering of God over a world in which people continue to live in ways that are destructive to themselves and the world, a world where many people suffer due to both physical and societal challenges.
- Perhaps they allow us to be better than we would be otherwise – to respond in loving ways that force us to think outside of our preconceived ideas of what is “normal” or “perfect.”
- Perhaps, most importantly, they show us the unconditional love that God shows for each of us. Without the usual defenses that most of us put up, they show us what it means to truly love – they show us what it means to be completely dependent on the God who knit us together, they show us what it means to be pure in heart.

More than a psalm about biology and how we are put together, this is a psalm about relationship – a psalm about the closeness of God in all circumstances. Just as the knitters I know care deeply about those for whom they knit, the knitting God is One who cares deeply about all of human life.

Listen to the beginning of this Psalm once again.

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.
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.

This is a God who never lets us go. No matter what our circumstances or challenges or sufferings, we are assured that this is a God who is close – whose right hand will hold us fast. I think of this mom and her child and I know that God is there with her, caring for her, caring for her child, perhaps showing them ways to love one another that they didn't even know they were capable of. Perhaps in the midst of the challenge of their lives they are in each other more fully experiencing the love of God than most of us.

But the God who is close also means that God is with us even in the places where we'd rather not have God go, the places we'd like to keep hidden – God searches the very depths of our hearts because God knit those hearts together and knows exactly where to look. And while that can be troubling – it is also freeing, because when we realize that God already knows everything about us, we can stop hiding and live in the light of God's love and be the people we were created to be.

As I talked with this mom, she talked about the complete innocence of her child. It occurred to me that this child has never had to hide from God. This child has always lived in the light of God's love. And while I won't pretend to understand "why," I am certain that this child was also dreamed about by God -- that this child is also fearfully and wonderfully made – that God has plans to work through this child in ways that we can't imagine.

And so perhaps, the intricate weaving of God comes in the way this child's life is woven through others – as we see the unwavering love of parents who give everything. As we see the support of a community surrounding this family. As we search our own hearts and learn to be better people because of the life of this little one who struggles.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus looks into the heart of Nathanael and sees an "Israelite in whom there is not deceit." I have no doubt that when God looks into the hearts of these special children, there is no deceit. There is no jealousy, no malice, no arrogance, no prejudice – only love.

And perhaps that is the most beautiful and perfect design of all.