



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Longing**

Psalm 139: 1-16

The Rev. Lydia Mulkey

July 12, 2020

My friend and I were talking about not getting what you want. She said that when she was young, if she wanted something her mother wasn't going to let her have, she would say, "I want that!" and her mom would say, "It's good to want. It means you're alive."

In the moment, it may have just been a mother's way to say, "You're not getting that, so be quiet," but her mom also knew there to be a lot of truth in it. As a geriatric nurse, my friend's mom had seen what happens when people no longer want for anything. They lose their will to live. It is good to want. Longing is something to be thankful for. In fact, I think longing is a holy experience.

Right now I have heard from so many of you that your deepest longing, during this pandemic, is for a return to human touch. You long for a hug, a handshake, to kiss your grandchildren on the forehead and rock them to sleep.

When we teach our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders about human sexuality, we talk about how sexuality is a much broader category of human experience than what they might be taught about it in school. One good and holy aspect of human sexuality we talk about is what psychologists call skin hunger. We are biologically hard-wired to crave skin-to-skin contact. It is a part of the way we were knit together in our mother's womb. That longing exists not only in our romantic relationships, but in all of our intimate relationships with family and friends. That longing for a hug or for a loving touch: You were created for that longing. It's a holy longing.

Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God." We are always restless, always longing. Being in touch with that longing attunes us to what is holy.

I wonder if you have noticed an increase in your restlessness and longing during the pandemic. Thinking about this time of isolation had me thinking about our ancestors in the faith who chose to live a life of relative or total seclusion. Many of our Christian mystics spent a great deal of time in solitude. These mystics wrote words that sometimes describe a deeper longing for God than I can imagine. Their writings take on a very physical nature, a physical longing for God. This longing is a gift. It is a reminder of our true home, which exists in the divine love that made us, who gave us these bodies, who made them to fit together. Perhaps your longing to hug your best friend and your longing for God are one and the same.

Teresa of Avila, who required periods of solitude within her order, wrote: "The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God out of God's goodness would make him experience it who may think that I am lying." She longed for others to know a physical longing for the divine. To experience enough lack that we would know the blessing of that holy longing.

Perhaps we have been distracted from this longing, but in the absence of physical touch, we find it again. So many of you have expressed your sadness and grief about the loss of so much physical touch, but what if we reframe that longing as a blessing; as a reminder that our souls are blessedly restless until they at last find their rest in the realm of God, at one with the holy in body and soul. The good news is that this God you long for is available to you right here and right now. Wherever you are, whoever you are or are not with right now. There is a divine love that is present to you, a love you long for, but a love that also longs for you.

The love mentioned in the book of Ephesians when the writer says, "I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit (17), and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love (18). I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

May you know a holy longing today that can only be filled by that holy love.  
Amen.