

**Shoebox**  
**“You are the apple of God’s eye.”**  
**Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24**

*Second in the series, Xtreme Love: lessons from the Methodist heart*

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January 11, 2009  
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**How Good?**

There was a man who lived next door to a church I served. He never came to worship and I never had an opportunity to visit with him, except for once. I remember his apology that he never went to church, though he doubted that God would want him there. “Why?” I wondered. “You’d always be welcome.” He said, “But you don’t know what I’ve done;” and as hard as I tried, I could never convince him that God would forgive anything, and that God did, too, want a relationship with him.

*You don’t know what I’ve done.*

I guess a lot of people feel that way. I don’t know if it’s because some “religious people” give the impression that in order to go to church you have to be good; that church and God are only for people who already have their act together. I don’t know if it’s because sometime they were a part of a church, but something went on in their family that became known to church folk who made it clear that they were no longer welcome. I don’t know if it was because their own parents disciplined them in a way that they came to believe they just weren’t worth it. It could be any of these.

I know that some people have just made terrible mistakes, then think that God must be so disappointed they could never measure up. They hear things like, “God is holy, and is incapable of even looking at sin. So if you messed up, God must turn his face away from you.”

So, there are all kinds of people who think that God can’t love them, won’t forgive them, and doesn’t want them around. They live their lives, often, so distant from God, the very source of love and life. It leaves them incredibly lonely, like they have a big, empty space in the center of their heart. They’d love to fill it and try all kinds of ways, but nothing works.

Because what it is, is that they are distant from God. For them it's like living on Neptune and always being cold because they live too far from the sun. Distant from God: maybe you've felt that way, too.

### **Fearfully and Wonderfully Made**

I get upset when I hear about churches that foster that kind of futility. There was a church, so I once heard, with a lot of cars in the parking lot, which attracted a woman who was looking for a place to worship. She entered the church and was seated in a place where there weren't many people sitting; one of the front rows. The choir sang a stirring anthem and everyone else sat there without changing their pretty dead-pan expression. The visitor, though, made one of those sounds you make when you see a beautiful burst of fireworks or take a bite of a hot chocolate chip cookie. The pastor began to preach; and every time he made a good point the woman shouted out something like, "Amen!" Everyone else was deadly silent, but you could tell that they were becoming uncomfortable. Finally, an usher came and asked her to be quiet. "But I'm praising Jesus," she said. "Well," the usher replied, "you're not going to find him here."

Wouldn't the usher be surprised if he knew that Jesus *was* there? In fact, Jesus made a point of finding the disruptive people: the broken, sick, spiritually and socially exhausted to let them know the others had been wrong about them. The gospels in the Bible are full of stories, one after another, where Jesus is going to them, healing, forgiving, or just spending time with them, to prove that God loved them from the very beginning and that nothing could make God give up on them.

That's what Psalm says, and why, I think, it might be my favorite. "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 hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." This isn't a description of a being that is easily revolted by someone's sin. It's a love song about a God who is so interested, no matter what, that he can't take his eyes off you.

In fact, you might say, you are the apple of God's eye.

I've seen parents like that. In fact, I've tried to be a parent like that: so in love with the kid that even though I see the mistakes and attitudes I really don't like, the love will always overshadow everything. Laura and I used to tuck the kids into bed and ask them, "Who loves you?" Then we'd rehearse with them, "Mommy loves you, Daddy

loves you, Jesus loves you.” Then I’d sometimes ask them, “What can you do to make us stop loving you?” And they knew the answer, they’d say it: “Nothing.”

A theologian by the name of Matthew Fox wrote a whole book on his basic theological insight, that for centuries the Church in the West has been so obsessed with what we’ve done wrong that when we talk about who and what humanity is, we are prone to start with the third chapter of Genesis. Adam and Eve sinned, we all have, and have been unacceptable to God ever since.

Sin is not a good thing; but that, Fox says, is not *fundamentally* who we are. Start with Genesis 1: God created humankind, male and female, and looked at what he created and said, “Very good!”

“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...My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.” From the very beginning, God has been there for you and always will be: no matter what.

Last week I mentioned the man most associated with the founding of the Methodist tradition, John Wesley, who was a priest in the Church of England. He had grown up in a devout Christian home with a mother who was an amazing Christian. His father was a pastor. Yet, he spent most of his early life certain that he had to do something to convince God he was worth saving. But it seemed the harder he tried, the more it felt like God was distant until, he was in down-right psychological pain, at the end of his resources. It was then that he listened to the Good News of Jesus with all his defenses finally down and discovered that God did love *him*, out of that love Christ died for *him*; and, as he put it, his heart was strangely warmed.

Prevenient grace is what we have been talking about here: it’s the grace of God that goes before everything else, the unearned work of God that accepts you and cares for you and prepares you for faith. Prevenient grace: it is there at the very beginning when you are knit together in your mother’s womb. On the day you were born, you were already and forever held by it. This is an essential lesson from the Methodist heart.

### **Apple of God’s Eye**

The apple of God’s eye: that’s what you are. I once knew an old physician; he had been the town doctor for many years, still practicing when he was in his 90’s. He had been a promising surgeon at the University of Michigan but came back to town

when his father had taken ill. He was the kind of doctor who could mix cutting edge medicine with old, reliable cures, healing practices new in the West like acupuncture, and his own, never-reckless ingenuity. After his death, the stories flowed.

One time a woman had given birth to a premature little girl; she weighed only a little over a pound. It was still before more modern medicine had invented the technologies that would give the child at least some chance at life. Sadly, the doctors at the hospital had sent the mother home with the child expecting that there would only be a few days of life. But the mother called this town doctor who wouldn't give up. He told her to get a shoebox and line it with soft cloths to make it into a crib. He showed her how to position a light bulb over it to shine on this tiny cradle; then he taught her how to feed her very little girl.

The attention of the loving physician; the relentless love of a mother: if it had turned out otherwise, their love would have been as true and their efforts would have been as courageous and heroic, but this time, by their efforts, the child was given a chance to grow. She survived.

Years later the doctor's own daughter went off to college and got settled in her dorm room: only to find that her roommate was that little girl in the shoebox kept alive by a love that would never turn away.

Like that physician, like that mother, God will never give up on you. Not you...or anyone else who lives on the face of this earth.

Prevenient grace: knowing how God feels about you can affect the way you think about yourself; it conditions the way we value people. All people: what we'll do about them and for them and with them.

I wish the man next door to the church knew. "You don't know what I've done," he said. But he didn't know that to God, he was still a shoebox kid.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." And that is just what God means to do.

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## Reference

[1] Matthew Fox. *Original Blessing*. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam © 2000.