

Known And Loved No Matter What

At The Art Institute of Chicago
Psalm 139

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
September 4, 2022
Matt Matthews

Last Sunday after church I went to Chicago to visit the Art Institute of Chicago. I was listening to my Spotify music list and as soon as the skyline appeared on the horizon, I kid you not, this song came: (SONG: 25-seconds, Holst, Jupiter, from *The Planets*.)

PIX (Chicago from I-55)



The next song, in about 8-minutes, came on when I was pulling onto Michigan Avenue. “We Are Family” by Sister Sledge.

We *are* family. The people cramming the crosswalks rushing across traffic. The people lounging in the park. I like Chicago, and it felt good to be surrounded by so many of my family that I had yet to personally meet.

I had come to Chicago for a 24-break mainly to take a breather, have dinner with a friend, and visit my old friends at the Chicago Institute of Art. The paintings there feel like old friends, *like family*, and I love wandering through the galleries stopping to meditate in front of these masterpieces that help me better “see” the world.

PIX (Chagall, White Crucifixion)

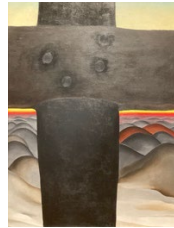


This is Marc Chagall’s *White Crucifixion*. This painting reminds me that Jesus—the Messiah—is in the center of life. Here, he’s in the middle of the world’s violence against our Jewish brothers and sisters: People are being hunted and killed, refugees are trying to escape, the synagogue is being desecrated, the saints above Jesus are weeping in heaven, hands-in-faces. At the

crucified feet of Jesus are candles representing hope, shedding light in tumult, light that no dark can extinguish.

This is an important painting in our world, an important part of the permanent collection of the Art Institute, and one of my old friends.

PIX (O'Keefe/ Black Cross, New Mexico)



Georgia O'Keefe is another old friend. I love her “Clouds” in the stairwell at the end of the hall of impressionists. This picture, in the American section of the museum, is called “Black Cross, New Mexico.” It conveys the same reminder to me as *White Crucifixion*: God is in the midst of all creation. When I look at nature, I don't need to see a cross on a hill to remind me that all creation is a gift from God, and that God is near. God made the world, loved the world, redeemed the world and everybody in it, and has given us creation as a holy treasure, a means of life: food, water, beauty.

PIX (O'Keefe/ Spring)



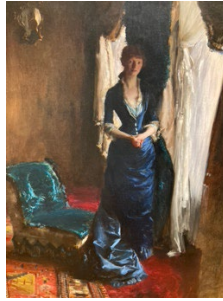
We catch a glimpse of God in the desert sunset, and in the colors of Spring. (This is another O'Keefe, called *Spring*.)

For the preacher, Sunday is never far away. I had begun my study for this sermon, and I walked through the galleries contemplating today's Psalm 139. The great truth of the Psalm is that God knows us—the real us, the inner us. There is no hiding from God. There is no need to hide from God. There is no fooling God. God is with us. We are hemmed in by God. God is in front of us and behind us.

This is enormously good news.

We don't need to pretend. We don't need to be somebody else. We can be ourselves. God knows us. God knows the real us. And God loves us.

PIX (Sargent/ Madame Louise Lefevre)



Museums are filled with paintings of beautiful people, dressed well, perfect posture, bathed in sublime light. We see ourselves in these scenes sometimes.

But sometimes we don't.

We aren't that beautiful. We aren't so unruffled. Our clothes aren't as beautiful. Our skin is not unblemished. John Singer Sargent is a master at portraiture; this is Madame Louise Lefevre. His subjects are exquisitely framed, lusciously painted. The paintings and the clothes and the scenery and the people are perfect.

But we don't always feel so perfect, do we?

PIX (Emperor Hadrian)



Famous people often paid artists to paint or carve them as more handsome than they really were. Was Emperor Hadrian this good looking? Was his hair so striking? His face so smooth? Was he as tall or as broad shouldered as artists depicted him? Or did he have flaws that would show up on the canvas? Was he really missing a nose?

The arts can reveal. The arts can cover up.

With God, we can't cover anything up. This is what I thought about strolling the halls of the Art Institute on Sunday afternoon and Monday morning. We can be ourselves. God made us. And we are wonderfully made.

We don't need to hide. We can bring our true selves to God.

PIX (Dali/ The Image Disappears)



Salvador Dali, in one of his more accessible paintings, captures this woman disappearing. Have you ever wanted to disappear? Have you ever wanted to be unnoticed?

God notices. We don't need to hide. We are beloved. We are fearfully, wonderfully made. We need cover none of it up.

PIX (Hopper/ Nighthawks)



We may feel isolated and all alone, but we aren't, actually, alone. One name for Jesus is Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. Edward Hopper created this enigmatic scene. There's something unreal about it. There is no door into the New York all-night diner. The streets are too clean. But the souls inside are all too recognizable. They seem together and alone at the same time.

We've all felt that way.

It's good to know that God knows how lonely this life can feel. It's good to know that God knows what we need. God knows us and God likes what he sees.

There are times we feel we have it all together, and all is right with the world.

PIX (Renoir/ Two Sisters)



This is Renoir's *Two Sisters*. Here is beauty and harmony. And contented belonging. We may know the feeling.

PIX (Picasso/ *Nude Under A Pine Tree*)



This is Picasso. This woman may feel none of the contentment in the Renoir. We certainly have known this feeling, that we've been broken into cubes then put together all wrong. Or that we're seen as broken or ill-fitting.

These are the sorts of things you're prone to think about with Psalm 139 in your head where you're looking at such beautiful art.

Art has a way of looking at the world. And each picture captures a moment. Each picture distills, or reimagines. Each picture distorts, enhances, magnifies.

We belong to the creator of the cosmos. And that creator knows us, knows our thoughts, is acquainted with our ways, and knows what we are going to say before we can even find the words.

God sees us from every angle.

God likes what God sees.

AMEN.

PIX (Preault/ *Silence*)



Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

10 LORD, you have searched me and known me.
2You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
3You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
4Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.
5You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
6Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
13For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
14I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
15My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
17How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
18I try to count them-they are more than the sand;
I come to the end-I am still with you.