

Growing Closer to God

September 7, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Psalm 139

I was out in Seattle visiting my grandson this past week. He turned two a couple of months ago and loves to draw. In the midst of all the dump trucks, dinosaurs, flowers, and octopuses, he said, “I draw grandpa.” (*Put up on screens the picture of the drawing by my grandson - basically a stick man.*) And sure enough, he did. An uncanny likeness, don’t you think?

I actually just told that story to lead into this one - about a mother who was watching her boy drawing.

“Look, Mommy, I’m drawing a picture of God.”

His mother replied, “But honey, nobody really knows what God looks like.”

The boy smiled and said, “They will in a minute.”

Now, as you may have learned already, our Regathering theme this year is “Growing Closer to God.” The idea picks up on one of the themes that surfaced in the all-church questionnaire and the listening sessions the Discovery Team led earlier this year. I’m analyzing a bit here, not just reporting, but what I heard from the congregation was an awareness that holding on to authentic, progressive, love-and-grace rooted, justice-seeking, intentionally Christian faith in the world today, is just getting harder and harder – or maybe more to the point, more and more awkward. It can be pretty odd to be a practicing progressive Christian these days, especially when those who most loudly claim the name Christian are making a mockery of Christ with their nationalistic, anti-intellectual, narrow-minded version of the faith. We live in fear that somebody will associate us with them.

That struggle, plus our own insecurities about the seemingly illogical beliefs of our faith, and even the worry that someone will think we are sort of needy because we bother with church, all of that makes it harder, awkward, to hold on to an authentic, progressive, love-and-grace rooted, justice-seeking, intentionally Christian faith in the world today.

But for the love of God, you are not letting that awkwardness scare you away. Rather than backing off, so many of you expressed the hope to dig in deeper, to grow closer to God. Somehow, thanks be to God, you know there is more there there, and you want to discover it, own it, stand up for it, and refuse to cede the message of our faith to others who to distort it in increasingly disastrous ways.

In a different time, I would honestly resist the way I have just framed this. It is important to remember that growing closer to God is an end in itself. The spiritual life is worth pursuing simply for its own beauty and peace. Indeed, in pursuing the Divine, we discover ourselves most deeply.

But it would be tone deaf right now not to acknowledge that this moment calls us to pursue a more pragmatic, even utilitarian spiritual dynamic. We need to grow closer to God, we need the spiritual life, so that we can resist the distortion of our faith, so that we can hold on to the primacy of God’s love and

grace for all, no exceptions, so that we can, to use some vivid Biblical language for it, put on the whole armor of God, and stand against the wiles of the devil, against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness (from Ephesians 6). In addition to being a beautiful end in itself, growing closer to God will equip us for this moment.

But with that frame, I have to acknowledge next that a common theme we heard from the congregation was that you are not too sure of what growing closer to God actually means. Which, honestly, is a good place to start a spiritual journey. I mean, God, whoa. God, the Divine I am. The holy, transcendent, incomprehensible, ineffable source of all things, and not simply of all things, but of being itself. I mean, when we talk about growing closer to God, there is a bit of a danger of trying to say too much: of being like that boy I mentioned, innocently overconfident that we know what God looks like.

Of course, we are Christians, and although no one has seen God, we have seen Jesus, who is Emmanuel, God with us. But if I may abandon some theological nuance here, Jesus gives us a great moral vision - not just rules to follow, but a way of life grounded in love and truth and forgiveness and generosity of heart toward all, and that's fantastic, that's such a gift. But even if it were perfectly clear what it meant to live that life in the here and now, which, I think, it is not, I think what I heard you longing for, what we need, is more than a moral vision. It's a spiritual grounding, a relationship, if you will. It's not just to follow his way, but to know the one we are following. So, the longing remains to grow closer to God.

And, at last, that brings me back to the beautiful reading of Psalm 139 Kate gave us earlier, and my rather simple, but I hope helpful message for today. Our theme for this Regathering season is Growing Closer to God, but this passage shows us that growing closer to God is not, as the phrasing may imply, an arduous journey to a far-off place. It's not as if God is off in a distant land and we must go searching, getting closer with every spiritual step we take.

Psalm 139 offers us the perhaps surprising, maybe even haunting, surely disarmingly intimate vision that God is here, near, present in this moment, now, and in every moment of our lives. Growing closer to God is not a matter of journeying from here to there. God is already here. Growing closer to God is a matter of becoming truly aware of what already is. We could use lots of images here: breaking down the walls that keep us from seeing God; working through the personal garbage or trauma that hides the Divine from us; expanding our minds to welcome the fullness of reality; opening our hearts to what we know is true; letting the scales fall from our eyes so we can see God. Growing closer to God is about becoming truly aware of how near God is, nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

Growing closer to God doesn't happen magically. Like a human relationship, it takes time and at least some intentionality. In a human relationship getting to know things about a person helps know the person. In the same way, getting to know things about God, through scripture, through worship, through exploration with others, through reflection on the life to which God calls us, and enacting that calling in service, all of that helps us get to know God. At some point, what you know about someone turns into knowing someone. And with God one of the most important things we find is that God is not far off, but is right here, with us, among us, in us.

As we go through this Regathering journey, of growing closer to God, let us join together in discovering what is already right here – in us, among us, always. Amen.