

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

"O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 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. Your 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. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them -- they are more than the sand; I come to the end -- I am still with you."

As I pondered this scripture, I wondered, what would this scripture sound like if it were paraphrased by clients of Every Child's Hope? What would God be seeing and knowing in those served by ECH?

You saw me being abused and struggling to cope
(Residential Treatment)

You saw me having trouble in school and unable to learn (Gietner School)

You saw me afraid of being away from my Mom while she went to work (Early Education Center)

You saw me running out of parenting options and losing my temper and my hope (Family Connections)

You saw me homeless and scared I wasn't going to make it on my own (Steppingstone)

In our residential treatment center, we work with up to 49 boys and girls with emotional, behavioral and psychiatric disorders. Most of these youth have come from backgrounds of abuse and neglect. We give them a safe and structured place to live while helping them heal from past traumas and learn to cope with life in more healthy and productive ways. Our qualified team of care managers, therapists, house staff, crisis intervention specialists, activities director and chaplain nurtures residents to greater self-awareness, improved daily life skills, and safer, more appropriate social interactions.

Children come to the Carrie Elligson Gietner school, both from our residential population and from the community, many with learning and/or behavioral disorders. We provide a better than 1:5 staff to student ratio in a secure learning environment, augmented by art and speech therapy, where students can work to improve basic reading, writing and math skills, and other basic

studies, without the distractions and challenges of a large classroom setting.

The ECH Early Education Center provides quality Head Start subsidized child care to low and moderate income families within the community who might otherwise not be able to afford it. Approximately 60 children benefit daily from the dedicated and caring teachers and staff who engage infants through children up to 6 years-old in imaginative play, social skills building, and pre-elementary learning. The Early Education Center is a partner site of the Head Start Program.

Our Family Connections program weaves together multiple efforts to support children and families in the communities. From family therapy to family reunification services, we provide quality support for struggling families on a sliding scale fee basis. We also provide family case management services for the State of Missouri, helping children find forever homes. One of the most exciting projects we have undertaken is the Family Solutions for Kids program. Through this program, which is funded through a grant from the St. Louis County Children's Service Fund, we provide free in-home interventions tailored to meet the unique needs of each family we serve. We also have a full-time and part-time child psychiatrist available to these families, with no waiting list. This program is available to ANY family in St. Louis County with children ages 4-19.

And the Steppingstone program provides transitional group homes and independent apartments to older teens aging out of the foster system and young adults who otherwise might be homeless. From group homes to structured on-campus apartments to independent apartments in the community, focus is placed on life skills, securing education and employment, and

living independently. These programs are ongoing in St. Louis and Kansas City. Our efforts to reach the homeless teen population in St. Louis have been enhanced by a second grant we received from the St. Louis County Children's Service Fund. We recently renovated the Baur Group Home in St. Louis and created a center for Steppingstone staff and clients. Steppingstone offices are now centrally located and the unique features of the Baur house provide for essential skill-building opportunities for clients.

All of these developments in the Steppingstone program would certainly be celebrated by one of the program's former clients. Nick came into the program a few years ago in need of a lot of help. He responded enthusiastically to the opportunities presented to him. He got his GED and obtained employment. Nick was diligent about learning how to create and then live on a budget, put his needs first and his wants second, set goals and then work to reach them.

And then, Nick reached that magical age when the state ceases to fund services. Nick was troubled. He knew he wasn't ready to be completely on his own. After talking with his care manager, Nick sent a letter to our Executive Director, Mike Brennan, appealing to the agency for continued support. Mike and Nick sat down to meet and talk, and the agency agreed to fund services for Nick for one more year, giving him the time he needed to build up more savings, practice what he had learned, and begin life on his own much more secure and prepared for what might lie ahead of him.

The needs of children and families in our communities are real. They are intense. And they are varied. Every Child's Hope is in a position to help, to serve, to seek to make a difference. But, inevitably, the time we have with children and families is limited.

We must eventually let go, release those we serve and hope that their lives become more peaceful and hopeful and successful.

It is helpful to remember the final words of the psalmist: even at the end, God is still with us and we are with God. Perhaps this is even more comforting when we listen to just how far God will go to be with us. Hear these words from Psalm 139 that we didn't read today:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

Our God is persistent in staying with us. Our God is determined to be there with us, helping to show us the way. Our God is tireless in seeing us through our troubles and wandering life journeys. Our God will face, with us, the truth of any situation we find ourselves in. That is good news not just for the people ECH cares for, but for all of us.

For ECH staff who face pitfalls and setbacks; who endure the anger and volatility of clients; who often do not see the results of their efforts.

For anyone trying to live in uncertain times where joblessness and homelessness are real and persistent threats.

For parents of all children doing their best and wondering if it is enough.

For people losing their way or their health, their loves or even their lives.

Our God surrounds us, pursues us and holds us fast.

One last story about a former resident of ours, whom I will call Kevin. He came to us with a diagnosis of pschizoffective disorder. He was prone to hearing voices, which generally pushed him toward violent thoughts. He had also been abused by his mother when he was younger. Kevin began his journey struggling with his emotions and temper. He became very involved in chapel, activities and even the recreational sports league called, CHAMP, that ECH participates in with other agencies like us throughout the St. Louis region. Kevin then moved into an on-campus apartment before being discharged from our program. Recently, Kevin was on campus visiting staff and describing his experiences at a local culinary institute where he is enrolled.

One of Kevin's favorite songs is, Sanctuary, which many of you probably know. Kevin chose to write alternative words to the song, related to issues of hunger. When he shared it, printed copies of the lyrics so everyone could sing along. A staff member played the guitar and another resident played the drums, and it was at truly sacred moment.

But, it is the words he wrote that stay with me, and now hold even more meaning as I think of his chosen profession. Hear the final verse:

Lord teach your children
To get enlightened
Not be frightened
Of the truth

Treat one another
As sister, brother
Give sanctuary and food

It is no small thing to not be frightened of the truth. For most, if not all of the clients served by Every Child's Hope, the truth has been and is a very scary experience. And this is often true in our own lives too.

May we seek to see one another as God sees us – with enlightened understanding and compassion. May we strive to help others and allow ourselves to be helped in our own time of need. And when we come to the end – of our rope, of our patience or our knowledge – when we come to the end of significant relationships, jobs or careers – when we come to the end of one opportunity and the beginning of another – when we come to the end of our health and of our days – may we find ourselves still with the God who never ceases to see us, come to us, lead us and stay with us. Amen.