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Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 Year B

In his book, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, Resmaa Menakem describes his grandmother. While she wasn't a large woman, her hands were "surprisingly stout, with broad fingers and thick pads below each thumb." Her hands hurt from a lifetime of cotton picking, and when Menakem was a boy, he'd watch television with his grandmother and rub her fingers to help her hands relax. "Sometimes she'd start to hum melodically," Menakem writes, "and her voice would make a vibration that reminded me of a cat's purr."

Menakem's book is about the deep and persistent trauma that lives in Black bodies, pointing out that many African Americans cannot feel settled around White people; a somatic response to not feeling safe or secure.

Menakem also describes racialized trauma embedded in White bodies, oftentimes expressed by reflexive, seemingly out-of-the-blue fight, flight or freeze responses triggered by the mere presence of a Black body. White supremacist racial myths – perpetuated lies that Black bodies are dangerous and somehow less than human – lead White bodies to tense and constrict protectively as a Black man walks by on the sidewalk or jogs

through a predominantly White neighborhood, as a Black boy plays on a playground with the hood of his sweatshirt over his head.

For decades in America, Menakem writes, we've tried to address racism cognitively — with reason, principles and ideas, trying to teach our brains to think better about race. But racism doesn't just live in our thinking brains. It also lives in our bodies.

As I read Psalm 139 for Sunday, January 14, which is also the weekend of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, I noted God's knowledge of our bodies. "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb." The Hebrew word for "to know" appears six times in Psalm 139: a clear theme. God's knowledge is comforting to the psalmist, who describes it as "wonderful." However, a God who knows our thoughts from far away and knows our words before they are even on our tongue also poses a challenge. Our God cannot be ignored or deceived. God hems the psalmist in, behind and before. There is no escape. God knows the whole truth of us — body, mind, and soul — whether we acknowledge it or not.

After publishing my book *Necessary Risks: Challenges Privileged People Need to Face*, in which I highlight Menakem's work, I've been invited to speak to different groups — (predominantly White, predominantly liberal) about the work of antiracism. During these discussions, someone will inevitably bring up their racist aunt or their White supremacist grandfather whom they've tried to convert without success. To me, this rhetorical move always feels like a deflection. Our racist relative too often turns into a convenient scapegoat for the difficult work of "knowing" we have yet to do ourselves. The personal work I've done to acknowledge my own deeply embodied racism has only led me to realize how much more work I have to do — a lifetime of painful self-examination, acknowledging of uncomfortable truths, and repentance for the part I've played in perpetuating injustice.

Menakem refers to racialized trauma as a "soul wound." It is a wounding of what makes us fundamentally human; a wounding of our ability to move beyond animalistic, lizard-brain reflexes, to heal embodied trauma. We often leave these soul wounds unacknowledged, focusing on the

intellectual work of changing minds; suppressing or avoiding the embodied trauma.

But God knows.

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me.” This knowing can be painful and challenging. The truth often is. Yet God pursues us in love and offers us the truth as a path to healing.

Questions for reflection

1. What thoughts, feelings, ideas or images arise as you read this psalm?
2. Who knows you? Is there someone in your life who knows you better than you know yourself? If so, what does this “knowing” feel like? Is it a comfort? Or a challenge?
3. Do you take comfort in God’s knowledge of you? What does God know about you that you have a hard time accepting or acknowledging yourself?