Let me share two readings as a prologue for this morning’s meditation.

**PSALM 139: 1-6**

Lord, you have searched me out
  O lord, you have known me.
You know my sitting down
  And my rising up;
  You discern my thoughts from afar
You trace my journeys and my resting places
  And are acquainted with all my ways.
Indeed, there is not a word on my lips
  But you, O Lord, know it altogether
You encompass me, behind and before,
  And lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
  It is so high that I cannot attain to it

A second from *Much Ado About Nothing* spoken by Dogberry, one of Shakespeare’s many colorful clown characters, the constable in *Much Ado* who speaks of his friend, Verges in these words as Dogberry makes a kind of excuse for Verge’s logic though Dogberry’s logic is also wonderfully convoluted at times:  *Goodman Verges, sir, speaks a little off the matter—an old man, sir, and his wits are not to blunt as, God help, I would desire they were; but, in faith, honest as the skin between his brows.*

As you muse on the Psalm text you can draw your own conclusions about the *Much Ado* text since maybe it hits a bit too close to home. In past chapel talks I have been known, as well as prone, to speak a little off the matter, hoping hearers might find their own way to get back on the matter. Over the years, the opportunity to share in chapel has been graciously extended by numerous campus pastors and as always it is both a challenge as well as a joy. Last spring as part of Mark Muggli’s two year long Shakespeare Experience, several chapel speakers, including Jim Griesheimer and Kate Narveson as well as Mark, utilized fragments from the bard’s plays that provoked thoughtful connections about the faith perspective. This brief meditation is a slight diversion from that approach remembering as Dogberry reminds us it may speak a little off the matter

The Psalm 139 text, as one Biblical commentary states and I quote “is a beautiful poetic expression of God’s personal moment-by-moment involvement in our lives. So intimate it is that God knows our thoughts before we utter them (vs. 2–4). God’s loving presence surrounds us at every moment, wherever we go (vs. 5–12).
In approaching this chapel talk these past few days it has been a bit of a struggle—to find a center, an anchor, a thoughtful reflection that could illuminate or at the very least ignite a small spark or response in the listener.

September has been incredibly busy as once again the rehearsal process has dominated the days and nights, shaping another in a lengthy list of theatre productions—ironically this time to be performed outside in front of the Sampson/Hoffland laboratories bringing back memories of doing theatre in the basement of the Valder’s Hall of Science for the first 15 years of my tenure at Luther. The scientists and theatre faculty made odd but exciting bedfellows during that time.

Once the rehearsal and performance journey is underway as the director of a play everyday one is confronted, challenged, emboldened, frustrated, excited, encouraged, mystified, bemused, amused, strengthened, confused, delighted, and enlightened by the company one keeps. And that current company includes colleagues that one can trustfully lean on for support while also learning much as well in the process. And the same is true of the students involved. The student actors, technicians, stage managers, musicians generate a wave of infectious energy as their collective and cooperative spirits lift the cloud from any grumpy troll’s mood.

Yes, theatre making is both a communal as well as community enterprise, for every idea, thought, impulse, image, or instinct one generates as a director, that idea, thought, impulse, image or instinct is extended, deepened and sharpened through the work of others. It is an art form that demands, requires, and lives through the interaction, support, and commitment of an ensemble. From presenting plays in Valder’s basement, to Storre theatre, to a barn that no longer exists on the edge of town, in gym one of the field house, the CFL, a tent in front of the library, the Koren building, Valder’s concourse and lecture halls to the current spaces in the Center for the Art, the shaping and creating a piece of theatre to share with an audience remains part mystery, part grunt work, part careful planning, part serendipity, part numerous hours of ensemble problem-solving, part literary analysis, part this, that, and more of this and that. And through it all, from Hair to Antigone, from A Midsummer Night’s Dream to Spring Awakening, from Waiting for Godot to West Side Story, from The Secret in the Wings to Much Ado there have been plenty of moments of doubt, questions of worth, pondering about the value of it all and what truly is it all about and does it really matter?

You trace my journeys and my resting places
And are acquainted with all my ways.
Indeed, there is not a word on my lips
But you, O lord, know it altogether
You encompass me, behind and before,
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Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is so high that I cannot attain to it
The answer or answers or at least reflections on those questions of value or matter or worth are many and complicated but deep, deep, deep in my soul there is a stirring that says, yes, this enterprise called theatre making does have value, however one defines that term and it does matter. Indeed, perhaps now more than ever, there is a need for folks to gather together, to commune, to hear stories that are funny, frightening, troubling, liberating, disturbing, questioning, joyous. The ephemeral nature of theatre making is a quality that sets it apart from film or television. It takes place right now, in this present moment with live actors in front of a live audience and then evaporates, leaving behind some recyclable programs, a few photographs, and assorted images stored in the memory boxes of audience and ensemble. As critic and director Robert Cohen writes, “that unique relationship we establish where the audience believes, yet knows it is pretense, where it is involved yet remains apart helps generate the energy that results when audience and actor are living in the moment together...One prime function of theatre is to address the uncertainties of human existence, and the very format of live performance presents a moment-to-moment uncertainty right before our eyes.”

In all that, somewhere, somehow this work for me connects to something beyond the restricted constraints of the human landscape. To this day I still ponder how my faith has shaped my work and vice versa. That sorting out remains an animated journey and has been one mostly traveled in this place, this community that continues to examine faith and learning, Athens and Jerusalem. So taking a chapter from last Saturday night’s Sweet Honey in the Rock performance, you got to do what the spirit say do: walk, shout, sing, write, speak, dance, sit, stand, march, do and that spirit continues to push me to do theatre.

The Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis bears the name of the legendary theatre director, Sir Tyrone Guthrie who visited this campus in the late 1960’s. In his autobiography A Life in the Theatre, he wrote the following: “I believe that a theatre, where live actors perform to an audience which is there in the flesh before them will survive all threats from powerfully organized industries which pump prefabricated drama out of cans and blowers and contraptions of one kind or another. The struggle for survival may often be hard and will batter the old theatre about severely...but it will survive. It will survive as long as humankind demands to be amused, terrified, instructed, shocked, corrupted and delighted by tales told in the manner which will always remain humanity’s most vivid and powerful manner of telling a story... The theatre is the direct descendant of fertility rites, war dances and all the corporate ritual expressions by means of which our primitive ancestors, often wiser than we, sought to relate themselves to God, or the gods, the great abstract forces which cannot be apprehended by reason, but in whose existence reason compels us to have faith.”

Indeed, you got to do what the spirit say do!!