

Hear the Word of God from Psalm 139:

- You have searched me, Lord,  
and you know me.
- 2 You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- 3 You discern my going out and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.
- 4 Before a word is on my tongue  
you, Lord, know it completely.
- 5 You hem me in behind and before,  
and you lay your hand upon me.
- 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.
- 7 Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?
- 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
- 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
10 even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.
- 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"  
12 even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.
- 13 For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.
- 15 My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,  
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- 16 Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.
- 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, [\[a\]](#) God!  
How vast is the sum of them!
- 18 Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand—  
when I awake, I am still with you.

I suppose this is an appropriate time, given the scripture of the day, to announce to you all that my husband Michael and I are pregnant. We are very excited to be partners in the miracle of knitting a new person together, and feeling the growth of this tiny, complicated being expanding and forming in the middle of my person has been utterly awe-inspiring. As a person who has killed *more than one* cactus, bamboo, and succulent—

seemingly indomitable plants that I somehow still managed to fail—it feels surreal and even ill-advised to preside over the becoming of an individual, a human, a child of God. And yet, here we are, and I am grateful.

Spinning the web of this small person, I am transported back into the Genesis myth, where God forms Adam, who's name means “Man of Dust,” out of the mud, and fills his lungs with the inspiration of life. I imagine God's hands holding the unformed dirt of Adam, and, like a potter, shaping him with care and precision, tirelessly working on this intimate complex of the human form until God fashioned a being in God's own image and likeness. Adam is a creative project of God's: And God called Adam *good*, just as God celebrated the entirety of creation in the Genesis myth with *satisfaction* and a *sense of completion*.

In my own creative pursuits, particularly as a musician, but also as a writer and academic, I find touchpoints to relate to this story—the sense of satisfaction and completion described by God in Genesis is an outcome rarely achieved, to be honest. But every so often, I have written a song, or composed a cello line to a friend's composition, that felt, at its end, like something awe-inspiring, precious and complete—often that arose from a place *outside* myself, surprising in its form and formation. These first few months of expectant parenthood conjure a similar sense: The passive creativity that my body somehow knows how to *do*—to form limbs, organs, senses, personality, wit, capacity, passion—transcends the many creative projects I have yet done in my life, and seems to arise from a Divine place. My body knows things my mind cannot comprehend, and my organs have capacity to *do* a task that my hands would fail to fashion. I'm sure many of you, as parents, aunts, uncles, and other relations to young people, have stood in awe of this great, intimate miracle of creativity, as well.

Like God, we look upon this small life in satisfaction. It serves as a good reminder, looking in on this tiny life who Michael and I love and cherish incomprehensibly in spite of knowing so utterly little about this person—limited, really, to their tiny little kicks that we have just started to feel—that this child, **like all of us**, really is fearfully and wonderfully made.

Our child is not exceptional in this way. **Each of us is an unlikely miracle of matter and life-force.** Stepping back from its immediacy, we can also see how utterly special the miracle of each life *is* in a vast universe. Logically, we know we are likely not the only planet to sustain life—but, for all our exploration and technology, we have yet to find it, with any certainty. We are quite the anomaly, here, as creative, living beings—fearfully, wonderfully *made* in the image of God. Wow!

We don't often stand and marvel at the miracle of our own being, do we? As a rare example, poet Walt Whitman, a humanist and transcendentalist, wrote of this miracle in his poem *Song of Myself*, written in 1855, saying:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

...

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,  
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.

I'll tell you honestly: I have often approached this poem with a sense of discomfort, unsure whether it had a place in worship, or even in my own Christian worldview. It is so self-referential, it almost feels narcissistic—“I celebrate myself”? Should we not be celebrating *God*, celebrating *our neighbor*, and approaching ourselves with humility, putting ourselves last and the Other first?

When the pastors and staff team met to envision this next series, we talked about the passages from Matthew and Mark that underlay the discipleship cross we have been exploring in these past months. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is asked by one of his followers,

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37 He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

We spent a good deal of time on these axes of loving God—individually in devotion, corporately in worship—and neighbor—individually in mercy, corporately in justice.

Yet, often our discussion of these Greatest Commandments skips right over the central simile in the second half of the scripture: Love your neighbor *as yourself*. Our self-love is intended as a model and guide for how we love *beyond ourselves*. So, if we do not begin by loving *ourselves* well, in the spirit of grace, compassion, and unconditionality, what hope do we have of extending good and Godly love toward our neighbor? Indeed, by failing to love ourselves adequately, we heap upon our neighbor the same self-denial and negative self-regard we practice toward our own interior person.

I don’t know that many of us live with Whitman’s or the Psalmist’s sense of awe in the miracle of our own life, our own being, our own intrinsic *worth* in the universe of everything. In fact, many of us secretly live with an enduring belief in our own inadequacies, inherited from our peers, our coworkers, our families, our mentors, and on and on. How many of us have ever felt less-than, deficient, useless, or even—sometimes—worthless?

For some of us, our institutions and churches have planted in us this crushing, totalizing sense of our own worthlessness. Perhaps some of us were inculcated in a perverse version of Calvinism, positing that we are so rotted through with ravenous sin and perversion that we have no pathway toward good and rightly behavior or desires. Others among us have surely been raised to believe our desires, sexuality, cultural heritage, or very identities should be regarded as sources of shame, sin, and sickliness—weeds planted in our self-concept that fundamentally wither us as we grow. The Australian comedienne Hannah Gadsby in a Netflix special released this year recalled her own upbringing as a lesbian in conservative Tasmania, saying, “When you soak a child in shame, they cannot develop the neurological pathways that carry thoughts of self-worth. Self-hatred is only ever a seed planted from the outside in. But when you do that to a child, the child doesn’t know any different. It becomes as natural as gravity.”

The intertwined histories of Christian global missions and colonialism have also made self-hate as natural as gravity to many people worldwide, attempting to convince whole communities and cultures of the uselessness or deviousness of indigenous religions, languages, forms of dress, food, music, and entire cosmological systems. Shame-soaked self-effacement affects many of us, for reasons large and small, bombarding us to the point where it feels only natural to believe in our own un-remarkableness, or worse. For many of us, for a multitude of reasons, rehabilitating the flattened and trampled treasure of our cherished self is a monumental task that requires constant, sensitive tending to a garden overgrown with the weeds of entangled insecurities.

Let us be reminded that our self-hate and shame does *not* originate from God. The Psalmist’s words, a prophetic and revolutionary hymn of praise to the self, are, in fact, so similar to Whitman’s self-celebration:

For you, God, created my inmost being;  
 you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
**your works are wonderful,**  
 I know that full well.

The Psalmist is not at all ambiguous: **God's creative hand fashions wonderful things—and God fashions and forms us.** God travels with us, and knows us intimately. To celebrate ourselves is a holy act of devotion to God—to pause a moment and praise our being, to marvel at our flesh, to rejoice in the atoms that comprise us, to savor our souls and their fortitude and infinitude. I encourage us all to practice this daring and intentional self-love regularly, turning our gaze upon *ourselves* with the same uncomplicated, *a priori* unconditional love that the Bible *clearly states* God extends toward us.

In Romans 8, The Apostle Paul, speaking of each of our place in the family of God, effusively states:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,[\[k\]](#) neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Contemporary Methodist hymn writer Mark A. Miller, an openly gay African American man, paraphrases Paul in this way: “No matter what people say or think about you, you are a child of God. And there is nothing and no one who can separate you from the truth that you’re someone—you are family—[and] you are meant to be a child of God.” This delicious, basic truth serves to remind us all of our place in the family of God’s creation—*we are essential*. And nothing on heaven or earth can remove us from God’s favor, God’s love, God’s satisfied, parental gaze.

What, then, might it mean to gaze upon our neighbors—and especially our enemies—with this same sense of consequential awe? This is a sermon for another day, but it would, in short, provoke a revolution.

If we are to love our neighbor well, and keep the essential commandments that underlay all the practices of discipleship—devotion, worship, mercy, and justice—we absolutely *must* learn to see **ourselves** through the lens of love and infinite worthiness, just as our creator, parent God sees us. Only then might we sufficiently learn to extend this self-same joy of being toward our neighbor, fashioned by the hand of God who knits together each piece with intention, care, and the soft, pleased gaze of deep, gentle satisfaction.

Amen.