

“It Starts With Me”

January 14, 2023

Based on Psalm 139:1-18. The Beauty of the Body

Early in my ministry, as many of you know, I worked with college women around the country to *claim a Christian faith that empowers women*. Many of us had experienced a Christian faith that *does not* empower women, or people of color, or the LGBTQIA+ community, or people who live in poverty, and on and on. Much to the chagrin of Jesus, I would suggest.

At the root of this disempowerment, it seemed to us back then, lay the baseline belief that somehow our bodies were inherently bad: enticing lust, driven to sin, or even worse: inviting abuse from the husbands to whom we were morally obligated to *submit*.

Our ministry was designed to challenge all of that. To re-imagine, if you will, what it means to be *embodied* in this world: fearfully and wonderfully made, in the very image of God. Gifted and equipped as Christ’s faithful disciples to *enflesh* the good news of God’s Beloved Community. A community which included and celebrated those of us who had so often been disempowered by Christian faith. Not unlike what we do here at SPC.

This Scripture - Psalm 139 - became a foundational text for that ministry: I praise you, Oh God, the psalmist sings, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made! Wonderful are your works! Full of wonder! Including me! Including my body! Including my spirit! Including my ministry! Because it all comes from you! the psalmist says. The great grandmother God is knitting us all together in the depths of the earth and pronouncing us *good!* That I know very well.

But do we, O God, know that very well?

It did not take long, as my ministry evolved to include men and women and nonbinary people of all ages and races and nationalities, including those of us who appear to live with enormous power and privilege, to realize it is not just young women in college who desire to claim a Christian faith that empowers them. All of us, it seems, in one way or another, wield that *cruel knife* described by the poet Hafiz upon *our tender selves*, as well as upon others.

When it comes to the study and practice of nonviolence, it turns out, most of us must start with practicing nonviolence toward ourselves. Even Mahatma Gandhi has said the same, that the very first nonviolent action he ever needed to take was toward himself, and that his wife, Kasturba, taught him how to do it.

When we forget that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, when we forget that we are God’s WONDERFUL work, when we forget that our bodies are intricately woven together by our great grandmother knitting God, we project that forgetfulness onto the bodies of those we deem *expendable*, even if that expendable body is our own.

When we forget the eyes of love that behold us, that follow us to the depths of Sheol, that shine light through our deepest darkness, it becomes far too easy to blindly project that forgetfulness to others beyond our own limited vision.

It is, in fact, a *social justice* claim I would argue that our psalmist is making today.

We have heard mothers of African American and multi-racial boys remind us over and over again that the backs of their children's bodies carry bulls-eyes. To which we must respond, in the ancient Hebrew version of Black Lives Matter: WONDERFUL are God's works! That we know very well!

We have watched in seemingly helpless rage as immigrant teenage girls in detention bleed visibly through their blue jeans because Border Patrol agents forgot that teenage girls menstruate. To which we must respond, in the ancient Hebrew version of "God Is a Woman" by Ariana Grande: WONDERFUL are God's works! that we know very well!

We have crumbled in abject horror as suicide has become a leading cause of death for young people and as the rates of suicide are increasing in every single demographic group in the United States. To which we must respond, in the ancient Hebrew version of "Scars to Your Beautiful," by Alessia Cara: WONDERFUL are God's works! that we know very well!

When it comes to nonviolence, we often think of marches and sit-ins, legislative advocacy and civil disobedience. All of that is good and right. But if our Lesson today is any indication, it turns out one of the greatest practices of nonviolence we might be engaged with at SPC may be through our Prayer Shawl ministry, knitting together creations of love to surround us when we are sick or hurting or just plain need a hug.

When we can see ourselves as God sees us, as the psalmist sees us, as the Prayer Shawl ministry sees us, as Black Lives Matter and Ariana Grande and Alessia Cara see us, we cannot help but behold our mutual belovedness, and link arm in arm with the fearfully and wonderfully made work of God's entire creation, and welcome the ongoing knitting, hemming, seamstressing work of God to hold us all together as that vision of the Beloved Community our Scriptures set forth.