

Fearfully And Wonderfully Made

A Sermon Preached by Pilar Millhollen, June 3rd, 2018

Readings: from “Letters of Love” (Micah Matthias); Psalm 139:1 – 18

Dear Micah:

I am not asking you to defend your conclusions. But honestly, I do think that you should remember that while you have been living with this a long, long time, it is new for me. I don't expect you to rehash or relive every though you've had about this your entire life. But I am asking that you share at least a little of what you wish you could have expressed to me all along. I may not have been listening then, but I am listening now.

I truly am glad that you are feeling much happier now. No mother in the world could feel differently. But I am not convinced that your present state is due to a decision to “be who you really are.” I know that probably disappoints you, maybe even hurts you, and that is not my intention. I just believe that the truth as you see it may be just that: your truth.

Glad we're still talking. And there is still love ~ Mom

This was a response in a series of email letters, one of which we heard in our first reading, between Micah Matthias and his mother as at the age of 24, Micah made the painful and courageous decision to become open and honest with his parents about his gender identity that he had struggled to reconcile his entire life. Micah was born female and openly describes, both to his parents through the letters and to others, how he knew very early on that his body, as society had identified him, did not reflect how he felt inside. He describes thinking and praying upon it every day, usually multiple times a day, asking God to make him feel differently because the messages he received from society and his church did not acknowledge his unique identity. Micah now works for an organization called Sanctuary Collective – whose mission is to “inspire, empower, and support young LGBTQ people and allies as they live and organize for justice in Christian communities by training them and connecting them with a supportive collective of people.” Micah, as a lifelong Evangelical Christian from a devoutly religious family whom he loved deeply, decided to publish the email correspondence that took place between him and his beloved mother as the two struggled to communicate freely, openly, and with compassion in hope that he might bring some light to the thousands more youths who have found themselves in the position of potential rejection just for being exactly who they are. Since I grew up in an open and affirming church with at least one LGBTQ minister at all times, in a fairly open and affirming city, surrounded from a young age by gay theater professionals, my worldview assumed the posture that most faith communities, even most people in general, must have had no issue with someone's sexuality or identity. How preposterous would that be, I thought? It wasn't until late in high school that I started realizing the extent to which this was a “thing.” I noticed in my English class that the boy I sat next to all the time was largely alienated from many of our classmates. He was, in terms I wouldn't use now, what we might identify as “visibly gay” – meaning only that he dressed more trendily than the other boys, paid attention to his hairstyle, and had multiple piercings in his ears, which again, in this neighborhood in this city where my school was, meant he was radically different and indeed cause for smirks and sometimes contemptuous sneers. I wasn't too into socializing in high school anyway, but something told me without anyone having to say it that he was alienated because he was gay. The dance company for young adults that I was a part of also had a funny culture – it was really ethnically diverse,

had some very clearly LGBTQ dancers in it, but as many of them came from black churches, there was nary a peep of claiming their identities. I didn't think much of it until I started reading and hearing experiences of the deep pain and profound isolation that so many people who decided to come out were facing – from their families, friends, and religious communities. And today, there is sadly still very little movement in the majority of congregations toward inclusivity and breaking down the barriers that were put up for so long, with a tradition of using scripture to “clobber” folks with LGBTQ identities, as the gay Evangelical writer Matthew Vines puts it.

*Which is why it is so important that we look at our sacred texts, whether they be Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or otherwise, in their entirety to glean what it is that the divine spirit wants to communicate. Our psalm this morning, from the Hebrew Bible, is a song attributed to King David that celebrates the personal relationship he has to God, expressed in God's omnipresent spirit and careful creation of each person. It is, in many ways, a love letter to God but also a summation of the overarching care that the divine spirit has for all people, a theme that is played upon and expanded later in the New Testament. “You have searched me and known me. You search out my path and my lying down...you hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” It is a kind of attention deeper than even human-to-human care, an intimate knowledge that only God can have which the psalmist experiences in God's unconditional love for him. The second stanza describes a kind of comfort that nothing earthly can erase, an affirmation of the worth of the human that transcends any hurt he or she could experience: “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 (or hell), you are there.” No matter where he goes, no matter what dark night of the soul he experiences, God is there – “If I say, ‘surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me becomes night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.” But the core of this relationship, this profound sense of regard based on each unique identity, comes in the third stanza: “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.” This word fearful, which we've translated many times including in prescriptive passages about “fearing God,” has different connotations in Hebrew. The word used is derived from *yara*, which indicates awe, respect, and honor, rather than anxiety or terror. *Yara* as such appears as the root word in many other passages meaning love, or cling to, or serve. So when the psalmist cries, “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” it is both a declaration of the inherent goodness in the identity of the psalmist, and the unique relationship between the human being and God. Further, he declares, “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.” I can't help but hear Micah in these words; for what must it have been like, all through his life, to feel just the opposite? To hear a different message, a message that he needed to change who he was, to be something that he knew inside wasn't right, to become something else than what God had made him to be because other people better knew what God intended him to be than he himself? The trouble is, it is too easy to decide what God intends for us based on a handful of scriptures that uphold traditional social structures to which many of us may be accustomed, but which contradict the dozens more passages that hold God's embracing and indeed radical love above all else. Which is why a psalm such as this is valuable not just for its glorious celebration of God and the human being, but because it expresses *the* theme that recurs most in our sacred texts, that the love of God is constant, ever-present, and extends to all. And yet, All Souls Bethlehem,*

we are still in the minority in such an affirmation. In our work to challenge the far too dominant narratives that deny divine love to certain people based on identity, it matters to listen to the voices that have dealt with this directly. Micah is one of them, and he articulates beautifully in another response to his Mom what it is like to live with such confusing messages from the people that he knows love him. He writes:

I have been seeing Christian therapists off and on since I was 14. After following their suggestions and offering this up to God every day as I woke up, throughout my day as it came up again, and every night as I lay in bed to take away or to help me through it, the only thing I have ever received from God as a response is an overwhelming peace, rest, and comfort in knowing that I am just as he intended me to be. Not, "try harder," or "keep laying this down," but only and ever and always, "Be still and know that I am God."

For years, I thought this was a mistake – my sin nature tempting me to stop my daily process of obsessing and beating myself up over something I couldn't change. I wanted to ignore God and listen to his followers, thinking that I must be hearing him wrong.

I am strong and certain that this is a part of God's plan for me – both in the way it has affected my life, and the lives of others as I speak this truth. You suggest that it is only "my truth" – that this is not true to anyone but me. In some ways, that is a hard statement to wrestle with, and one of the thoughts that stopped me from speaking this for so long.

But God has fashioned a beautiful spectrum of creation, especially when it comes to humanity. People have hair colors ranging from blinding white to jet black. Skin tones ranging the same. Personalities ranging from soft-spoken to boisterous and outgoing. Our insides and our outsides are not all the way on one end of a spectrum or another. There is a range, a diversity in shades so subtle. Why do we acknowledge this in every aspect of humanity except gender and attraction?

It's such a simple question, but it's one that is still not ready to fully be answered by many folks in our beautiful spectrum of creation, as Micah puts it. But as people who do acknowledge and affirm the uniqueness of all God's human creations, it is up to us to continue to open the conversations for folks around us – whether friends, coworkers, or family members – who are not quite ready to consider the value in those whom they may not understand, or who desire to change those who are different. It is up to us to counter the texts used by so many people of faith – from the Leviticus law to dubious statements in the Pauline letters – with a reminder of the law that surpasses any of these exclusionary statements – the prescriptive that tells us our love for God is expressed in our love for each other, and its cousin which tells us that God's love is, like the psalmist says, unconditional and always present. "I come to the end; I am still with you." No human being has the right, let alone the capacity, to determine who God loves and doesn't love – but every human being has the right and the capacity to help promote and practice the expansiveness of God's love, which can only lead to that which all world religions crave to realize – peace. If we are to fully invest in our faith, it starts with us and moves outward. If we are to continue to grow into our full potential, it starts with us and moves outward. If we desire to see a change in society, it of course starts with us embodying that change.

Micah and his mother's letters to each other are part of that embodiment of change. In an epilogue, Micah points to the conversation as being ongoing – no sudden happy ending for either one, but a dialogue that continues to move forward, however slowly and with whatever small steps, but most importantly, one that is led by love and mutual regard. As we march into Pride Month, literally and figuratively, let us support Micah and others as they dialogue by

holding fast to the vision of love that God claims upon all of us, through the truth that we are each fearfully and wonderfully made.