

LEARNING TO LOVE OURSELVES

Psalm 139

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When's the last time you looked at yourself in the mirror and quoted Psalm 139, saying to yourself, "Look at me. I am wonderfully made!" (That's a rhetorical question, but I do invite you to think about it.)

In the church year, we are in between the major seasons of Christmas and Lent. One worship scholar says that these weeks right before Lent comprise what you could call the "shoulder season" in the church, small in-between times. This Wednesday the season of Lent begins - Palm Sunday is six weeks from today, Easter Sunday is seven weeks from today. Today is the conclusion of a three-week worship and preaching series called, "A Look in the Mirror." We've focused on three passages of scripture that all call us to look inward and reflect. Two weeks ago I preached on the passage in which Paul says, "I know the things I want to do, but I don't seem to actually do them. Instead, I find myself doing the things I hate." We talked about sin, and about how an acknowledgement of our sin leads us to an acceptance of the gift of grace and forgiveness. Last week Beau preached on Paul's words about "thorns," the particular burdens each of us carries, ways in which life is not perfect for us, and yet how we can learn to thrive despite those thorns. Since our topic is "A Look in the Mirror," today I'm going to invite us to consider how we think of our physical bodies. What thoughts do we have when we literally look in the mirror? And how do those thoughts affect our spiritual health and well-being?

You might be more familiar with Psalm 139 in the New Revised Standard Version
- here are verses 13 and 14:

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works.

This psalm calls us to remember that we are created by the God who loves us, and that God sees us intimately, in all our vulnerability. God knows us personally. God sees us as we are. God sees us, body and soul.

The psalms were written thousands of years ago, so this wisdom has been with humanity for hundreds of generations. So why is it that we are uncomfortable talking about our bodies, especially in church?

Over the centuries, Christians have sometimes neglected the body, disdained it, or punished it, ignoring the biblical affirmations that tell us that our physical bodies are created to be good.

Early in Christian history, influenced by Plato and Socrates, the church began to preach dualism, an opposition between the body and the spirit, and a separation between our physical and spiritual selves. To put it very simply, the church taught that the spirit was good and the body was bad. Often the body was described as an enemy, a source of temptation, something to be fought or conquered.

This idea did not come from the Bible. Many biblical passages talk about the unity of the body, mind, soul and spirit. The ultimate affirmation of our physicality comes in the story of the incarnation - God choosing to enter this world as one of us,

flesh and blood, born to a woman, living in a human body, then later suffering, and dying for all to see.

Yet this notion that our bodies are inferior to and separate from our spirits has persisted for centuries in the western, Christian world, leading to all kinds of harm and preventing us from optimal health and wholeness.

So we have this deeply ingrained negative attitude towards our physical selves. We have all lived with it, and as we age, we become accustomed to how we feel about our bodies. Most of us engage in some kind of negative self-talk when we look in the mirror. Maybe you don't say it out loud, but you probably have said to yourself something like this, "Ugh, my hair." Or "Wow, I look old." Or "Why do I look this way?" I would be shocked if there is someone in this room who has not looked in the mirror and commented about their weight.

But there is something different going on today for our teenagers. We start with what we have unfortunately passed along to them, what we ourselves inherited: a deeply ingrained negative attitude towards our physical selves. Now add on top of it what you know about adolescence, how challenging it is to adapt to a rapidly-changing body, how self-conscious most of us are at that age. And then add on top of that the advent of the cell-phone camera and social media. At anytime, anywhere, someone could be photographing you and posting a picture of you for all the world to see, an image that can never be deleted. And because you are so aware of the ubiquitousness of cell-phone cameras and images, you start looking at yourself more often, taking selfies, examining every pore, every pimple, every ounce, every muscle. You filter and

edit and try to make those pictures look the best they can. You become hyper-aware of how you look, criticizing yourself as you compare yourself to others.

This past Monday, the Centers for Disease Control released its 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey report. Nate quoted this in his weekly Waypoint Youth Ministry email. Out of 17,000 US high school students surveyed, nearly 60% of teen girls reported persistent sadness or hopelessness. The more data we see about teen mental health - particularly teen girls' mental health - the more dire the state of things appears. Ten percent of teen girls surveyed and 20 percent of LGBTQ+ teens surveyed said that they had attempted suicide. This is a 60 percent increase from a decade ago and double the rate of boys making such an attempt.

Struggles with body image are a significant factor.

That report prompted me to address this issue in my sermon today. You may not have an adolescent girl in your family right now, but I'll bet you have some in your circle of extended family and friends, and I know you care about them. One religious commentator this week read this report and wrote an article about it with the eye-catching headline, "The girls are not alright." The Wall Street Journal headline read: "Teen's Mental Health Distress Could be Worse than CDC Data Suggest." The Washington Post says that "the CDC Report on Teen Mental Health is a Red Alert."

To be clear, boys and men struggle with body image too, but it has reached a crisis level for our young women. We live in a culture that is obsessed with impossible beauty and weight standards.

There are many steps which families, schools and communities can take towards ensuring that our students find their way to better mental health. Simply acknowledging

the problem and talking about it is one step. Just last week, during confirmation class, our 8th graders participated in a class discussion about body image. They were shown videos about how the media change the appearance of models. Parents can talk to their teens and pre-teens about how to use social media in healthier ways, and make sure that their children aren't disrupting sleep by being on their phones all night. All of us can model better behavior by not constantly joking about our own bodies and making self-deprecating comments.

We have many resources in our own congregation who can help with these issues. Please let me know if you want to talk further about any of this.

Since I am here today not as an expert or a psychologist but as a biblical theologian, I want to return to the original question. Where does all this fit in with our faith?

Here's writer Sara Billups: "I grew up in a Christian home, but Sunday school lessons of Jesus' love did not apply to loving the body. I'd sit around the kitchen table with the women in my family while they traded diet secrets. As a kid, I learned to judge my body in spite of what I know to be facts: There is no intrinsic or moral good or bad when it comes to food. God created food to be enjoyed. Loving yourself includes loving your body. You can't despise your body and love your neighbor.

If I pray God would create a clean heart and renew my mind but secretly feel shame about my body, I miss the invitation for wholehearted acceptance of who I am in Christ. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 tells us to glorify God with our bodies because they are temples of the Holy Spirit. In church youth group we're often taught about God's creation, making mistakes, and friendship. We should do a better job of teaching kids

that being fearfully and wonderfully made extends past the womb and into everyday life, in how we care for other people and understand our mental and physical health.

Teresa of Avila famously said, “Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” If we love Christ, we love our body. And if we love our body, we are called to tend to it and to love it the way it is at this very moment.

When Jesus describes what the reign of God is like, he frequently uses the imagery of a great banquet. It is a scene of abundance where people eat and drink and converse and laugh, an experience of joy and community. Isaiah 25:6 takes us to the ultimate dinner party, where God “will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples.” Around that table there is room for all of us, in all of our God-given shapes and sizes.

When God looks at us, God sees beloved creatures, wonderfully made.

Let us pray. Holy God, help us to learn to love everything you have made, even ourselves, even our bodies, so that we can love you and one another. As Jesus did.

Amen.