

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Shaped By God’s Hand”
Ordinary 23—September 8, 2019
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Lesson: Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18; Jeremiah 18: 1-11

Do you remember the television program *Cheers* where everybody knows your name? One of the reasons I liked the show was that everyone was real. They weren’t perfect. Frankly they were sometimes more than a little odd which might be a very good description for every one of us. In the midst of their drama and their oddities, they were known, and cared for, and missed if they didn’t show up. It sounds a little like the church or the way a church should be.

The church can be a place where everyone knows your name because we are called together and celebrate the One who made the universe including the likes of us. So walk in the doors of this place, or any church, and you enter a space where you are known completely because you are in the presence of the one who made you. The psalmist proclaims of God: 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.

Psalm 139 offers a picture of God who knows everything about us and from whom we can never be fully separated. There is no place we can go that is beyond God’s reach and God knows every single one of us by name. Explaining the actual work of creation, the Psalmist describes God as a weaver or knitter. Patrick Willson writes: “In ancient Israel, as in most cultures, weaving and knitting were done by women; the psalmist pictures the Lord doing her knitting in a mother's womb. If that isn't enough to fracture our customary metaphors for God, the psalmist goes on to imagine the Lord weaving “in the depths of the earth,” fashioning creatures made of earth (Gen. 2:7). In secret and mysterious places her hands knit together bone and muscle and tendon; they weave weft and warp of veins and arteries, nerves and fascia to fashion a physical human body.

“The psalmist's fingers play over the strings of the lyre as arms embrace the instrument and the belly rumbles in hunger. This is what it is to be human and alive: ‘I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made!’ The psalmist delights not simply in physical existence but also in being physically known and created. This human body, frail and vulnerable though it may be, is nothing less than proof of the existence of God.”¹

God knit us together, everyone of us. Look around you and see the wonder of God’s good creation. You don’t have to fly out to the Grand Canyon, or visit Yosemite, or travel through Europe or Asia, wonderful and beautiful as those places are. You can look very simply at yourself in the mirror and see a wonderful part of God’s good creation. St. Augustine used to shake his head in bewilderment that people “go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.”² We are fearfully and wonderfully made. As Dorothy came to understand, you don’t have to leave Kansas or Wilmington to discover something of God’s glory. Just look in the mirror!

Jeremiah offers a slightly different image for God as a potter who shapes us out of clay. When we lived in Connecticut, the school had a wonderful program called Empty Bowls where the art department opened the ceramics studio and any student or adult could go and “throw” or create a bowl. The bowls were then painted and fired and then they were sold, often to the artists or the parents

¹ Patrick J. Willson, *Fearful and Wonderful and Ordinary*, The Christian Century, August 30, 2010.

² Ibid.

of the artists and the proceeds were given to support a hunger program in the community. My first attempts were not particularly good, but with wet clay, I was able to reshape them into something that now lives in our house.

God the potter shapes each one of us according to God's design. Jeremiah's word is not totally easy. Jeremiah goes to the potter's house and he sees that the vessel the potter was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. And God says: "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."

That is something that happens to every one of us. When we are less than God calls us to be, when we are less loving, when we fail to celebrate the image of God in every one of God's children, when we are less than generous, when we turn mean or nasty, God reshapes us to make something new. The good news here is that we don't need to stay the way we are. The one who made us, the one who knows us completely, the one who loves us most, is even right now at work creating something new.

Today we celebrate one hundred seventy years of Green Hill Presbyterian Church. Back in 1849, a group of Presbyterian workers at the DuPont Powder Mills purchased land from a farmer and sold cemetery lots as a way to raise funds to build a church building. The farm that was here was Green Hill Farm and that likely is how we got our name. Those early Presbyterians didn't know any of us but they built this building with the hope that it would stand in praise of the God who made us all.

Across the years the people of Green Hill have lived God's mission in simple and profound ways. There have been struggles, times of difficulty, and there have been times of great joy. In a time of war, the Stirlings who owned a store nearby, took in a young drummer boy who was sick and when he died, they saw to it that he was buried right here in our cemetery. Following another time of war in 1956, two refugee families were sponsored by this church and the old West Presbyterian Church—living out God's call to care for strangers and immigrants. In 1962, six girls from our senior high fellowship spent two weeks working in Puerto Rico with people in need and in 1964 the church endorsed a policy that no racial discrimination be allowed for the use of church facilities. It strikes me that that was an act of courage in those days, celebrating God's creating all of us, not just some of us.

In the 1970s we started the flea market and our work with Meals on Wheels and in the 80s we started working with Emanuel Dining Room. Those continue along with new mission programs today, especially our focus on standing with people who know the pain of addiction.

As we prepare to celebrate this special place, I would charge you to consider where and how God has reshaped you? Where and how has God given you a new vision? Where and how has God made something new of you? Where and how does God still need to reshape you? The God who knit us together, the God who shaped us is not through with us. There is no place we can go that is outside God's reach. In the days to come, may God shape each one of us into a more perfect example of God's design.

Thanks be to God for the blessings of these one hundred seventy years and may we become an even greater blessing in the years to come.

Let us pray: Almighty God, creator of the universe, we are awed by your wondrous works and overwhelmed by your infinite wisdom. For all your majesty we praise you; yet even more we rejoice that you do not ever forget us, that you know us every one by name, that you shape us, that you knit us together. So give us strength to live up to who we are: children of God, made in your image. Amen.