

Holy Pieces of Work

As I mentioned in our weekly newsletter, *The Banner*, this week, I only played the game, “Operation” at friends’ houses. We didn’t own the game that I can remember, so it felt like an exotic treat to play it. I can still feel the thrill of extracting the funny bone without setting off the dreaded buzz that sounded when I hit the side of the opening. Part by part, piece by piece, each player does their best to remove all of the parts they can without causing poor wide-awake Sam the patient’s red nose to buzz and light up. Each player then receives payment for a successful operation, so the “doctor” with the most money wins. In other words, the player who can extract the most body parts from Sam takes the prize.

Early on in the movie, *Mean Girls*, three of the Plastics, the clique led by Regina George stand in front of a full-length mirror and begin a ritual—an unholy liturgy of sorts—where each one picks apart a part of her body she doesn’t like—hips, calves, shoulders, hairline, pores, and nailbeds, for goodness’s sake. The three young women then turn to Cady—the new student, recently returned to the US after living with her academic parents in Africa; they clearly expect her to chime in. She hesitates at first; she doesn’t know how this game is played. She’s a quick study however, coming up with bad morning breath as her contribution.¹ It’s an absurd scene, **and** it’s an all-to-true-to-life scene. These characters voice what so many of us think about our own bodies. Regardless of size, ability, nationality, class, race, gender, or age, we are taught from early on that there is something wrong with us. And—quite often—there’s a solution to

¹ <https://youtube.com/clip/Ugkx9ykgu6OrWdlqH70rLZf7uR3IMxj2kwOE>

correct it, to fix us. We are told we need to do this or buy that to be thinner, prettier, more handsome, flaw-free, and therefore worthy of love and respect.

Psalm 139 is one of my favorites. It differs from many other psalms in that it concerns an individual rather than a community or a people. It presses the notion that God is intimately involved with individual human beings in the most mundane of circumstances, including standing up, lying down, speaking. The psalmist insists that God is ever-present and always concerned no matter where a person finds themselves—the highest of heights, the lowest of lows, and every place in between. A dear friend once told me that in a moment of deep trauma and crisis, she silently repeated, “the dark is not dark to you” over and over again to herself, enabling her to remember that she was not alone, even in the most trying of times. It is this psalm that carried me through the summer following my graduation from college and my mother’s recurrence of cancer. I took great comfort in knowing that I could not get lower than God, that—to quote a colleague—there was and is nowhere I can go where God is not.

This psalm has more to say too, of course, boldly declaring that we are each “fearfully and wonderfully made.” We are fearfully made, meaning that our bodies are awe-inspiring and infinitely mysterious. And we are wonderfully made, extraordinary creations of a wise and imaginative God. The psalmist speaks of God’s being intimately involved with our creation, knitting each of us together stitch by stitch, cell by cell. This text has been invoked to speak to the sacredness of life before birth, and yet, we miss the psalmist’s intent if we insist that our sacredness, our holy beauty ends when we draw our first breath or when we begin to toddle or lose teeth or gain weight or lose our hearing or lose our hair. I am, you are, they are still now fearfully and wonderfully made—present tense. This really should be a straightforward and

even short sermon. If there were ever a moment to invoke the wisdom of a bumper sticker—“the bible says it, I believe it, that settles it”—this would be that moment. And yet, though the bible clearly says it, I am not so sure we can bring ourselves to believe it, not really. And I am convinced that we need to find a way to begin to believe it, not just for our own sake but for the sake of a world that struggles with believing that we and everyone else is fearfully and wonderfully made, a world that seems determined to insist that the very opposite is true.

My husband Dave and I joined a giddy group of movie goers dressed in every imaginable shade of pink on Friday night to see “Barbie.” I’m not sure what I expected, and I promise not to share any spoilers other than the fact that I came out with a smile and a few dried tears on my face. I owned a few Barbies growing up and one of my beloved babysitters created gorgeous evening gowns for them, but I was drawn more toward baby dolls. Later I grew to resent Barbie and the unrealistic expectations she seemed to impose on me and other young women. It wasn’t Barbie’s fault, of course. She was a doll created in a factory, while I was a human being. I struggled to make that distinction, however, and very little in the world around me gave me much help making that distinction—including the church, sadly. I grew up in a wonderful Presbyterian congregation in Nashville, and I remain forever grateful and indebted to them for shaping my faith and encouraging my vocation as a pastor. But no one that I can recall said much if anything about our bodies being gifts. Bodies weren’t discussed much, except in the socially acceptable ways encouraging me to sit up straight, not bite my nails, and dress in ways that were appropriate and appealing at the same time. Within that vacuum of guidance, decades before Snapchat, TikTok, or Instagram, *Seventeen* magazine became my bible. I waited impatiently for the August issue to show up in my mailbox every July so that I could dream and

plan the perfect, life-perfecting back-to-school wardrobe. The joy of its arrival quickly soured every single time, as I worried about my complexion, my waist size, and the fact that I would never have long lean legs like the models did, the realization that I could not live up to what those pages preached and taught. I was fearfully and wonderfully made, but I could not see it, I could not hear it, I could not believe it. And there was no one trying to help me believe it, because for the most part, the world around me did not believe it either.

So wanting to see the Barbie movie seemed like an odd choice, until I read part of an interview with Greta Gerwig the director. In that interview, Gerwig tied her drive to make this movie to her experience growing up next door to a devout Jewish family. Gerwig spent many Friday nights in this family's home sharing Shabbat dinner. The father of this family would offer a blessing to his children and when Greta was there, he would include her, too:

'I remember feeling the sense of, "Whatever your wins and losses were for the week, whatever you did or you didn't do, when you come to this table, your value has nothing to do with that...You are a child of God. I put my hand over you, and I bless you as a child of God at this table. And that's your value.'" [Gerwig said,] 'I remember feeling so safe in that and feeling so, like, enough.' She imagines people going to the temple of the movies to see 'Barbie' on a hot summer day, sitting in the air-conditioned dark, feeling transported, laughing, maybe crying, and then coming out into the bright heat. 'I want people to feel like I did at Shabbat dinner,' she said. 'I want them to get blessed.'²

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/11/magazine/greta-gerwig-barbie.html>

I did feel blessed in a way coming out of the Gem Theatre in Kannapolis Friday night. And I found myself wondering how the church might reclaim its calling to make people feel blessed, too.

The message of scripture is not simply that anything goes. There are grace-filled challenging words within this ancient text, words we need to hear as individuals and as a community. And some of those challenging words are grace-filled, life-saving words that speak not only about loving our neighbor but also about loving ourselves—our *embodied* selves. And I'm not sure we can be all that good at sharing good news when we do not believe it ourselves, if we insist on playing non-stop rounds of our brand of "Operation" picking at our perceived flaws and inadequacies 24/7.

Yes, we are called to take care of our bodies, to tend to our health and well-being. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, treasured and beloved by God, and God wants what is best for us, which may mean better sleep, more activity, less sofa surfing, more water, and less sugar. And I believe in my bones that God wants every one of us—including every one of them—to know what it means to be blessed, to be loved and adored just as we are. Full. Stop.

The psalmist goes on to proclaim: "Wonderful are your works; that I know very well."³ In the past I have thought of mountains and stars and sunsets and peacocks when I have read those words. This week it struck me that I am among those works too, as are you. If I can celebrate the awe-inspiring beauty of the rest of creation, shouldn't I also be in awe of God's handiwork in little ole me? I am a holy piece of work, as are you, as are they—regardless of size, ability, nationality, class, race, gender, or age. It's not a matter of breaking the mold. There is no

³ Psalm 139: 14b

mold. There is no box. We are not mass-produced on an assembly line. We are one-of-a-kind creations of an endlessly imaginative creator. And if by the grace of God, I can even begin to see God's creative handiwork in me, I am convinced that I will begin to see God's blessed handiwork in others, too.

At one point in the film, Barbie stares at an older woman sitting next to her on a bench. She breathlessly whispers to the woman, "You are beautiful." And the woman replies, "I know," with an infectious, wrinkled smile and a twinkle in her eye. You are beautiful, too. You are fearfully and wonderfully made, too. You are a beloved child of God, too. And I hope you know it. They are beautiful; they are fearfully and wonderfully made, whoever they may be. I hope somehow, through us and by the grace of God, they can know it, too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.