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BUMC Pride Sunday Sermon
June 29, 2025

I was at VBS this week and it was beautiful! Thank you to everyone who helped make that happen! I got to watch our youth perform a skit and it was so nostalgic for me because I remember when I was a youth volunteering at VBS. In fact, I have a really, really clear memory from when I was in high school and volunteering at my home church's VBS that has to do with our scripture from this morning.

I was standing in the back of the room watching the kids sing a song about being fearfully and wonderfully made. After the song, an adult volunteer talked to them about what this scripture was saying about them and about God. I remember the room being packed with children all sitting around the teacher as she leaned in close to tell them the Good News: they are beloved by God.

The God of the whole world took the time to knit them together in their mother's womb. God knows every part of them and delights in what God finds there. There is nothing they could do to separate themselves from the love of God. God is with them wherever they go, no matter what. They are beautifully and wonderfully made, exactly as they are, accepted and loved to the very core of their being.

I am not sure how closely the kids were listening to her lesson, perhaps they were eager to get back to the singing. But I was hanging on the teacher's every word. I fully believed what she was saying for these kids. And it moved me.

Then a thought popped into my head: What if one of these kids is gay?

Can you point to a moment in your life when what you had believed, what you had been taught began to unravel? This is one of those moments for me. The first of many threads pulling loose.

"What if one of these kids is gay?" I thought as I stood in the back of the room at VBS as a high schooler. When they grow up and come out, do we take back what we said about God creating them with intention and love and care? Do we take back that they are fearfully and wonderfully made?

For context, the church I grew up in, where this VBS was happening, was a nondenominational megachurch in Oklahoma. I now describe this church as Evangelical-lite. There was a lot of good that came out of my first church community, like leadership and preaching opportunities, there was also a lot of harmful theology I picked up there.

I picked up some ideas that put conditions on God's unconditional love. I picked up some ideas that the Good News of Jesus had limits, that maybe it didn't sound like Good News all the time for everyone.

This was a moment, maybe the first moment I can remember, of calling that harmful theology into question. I began pulling this thread of how far God's love actually goes on behalf of the kids in that room.

It wasn't until about a decade later while in seminary that I began to wonder if I was bisexual. And this question became a little more personal. I attribute this not only to all the dismantling and unlearning of systems and theologies of oppression I was doing in the classroom, but also to the fact that many of my friends in seminary were queer. The combination of theological openness and queer community created enough safety for this very suppressed part of myself to rise up into my consciousness.

And yet, even surrounded by amazing gay Christians and freeing my theology, I still struggled to accept myself as bisexual. I found that believing that it is okay to be gay in general and accepting my queerness for myself were two very different things. I couldn't yet believe for myself that *I* am beautifully and wonderfully made, though I believed it for other queer people.

This makes me wonder: how does the Psalmist get to the proclamation that they are fearfully and wonderfully made, that God knit them together with love and intention? How did they get to that place of belief, of affirming who they are created by God?

Looking back at the verses before that one in Psalm 139, we see that they got there by traveling through darkness. They get there by going to places where they thought God would not be.

In verses 7-12 the Psalmist says:

*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, you are there.*

*If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

*even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and night wraps itself around me,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

How does the person who wrote this Psalm know that no matter where they go God will be there? How did they become sure that God would go into the darkness to be with them? I've

found that in life, those kinds of claims only hold real weight when they come from someone who has gone through it, someone who has traveled to the places where they thought God would not be. And I wonder if that is what happened to the person writing this Psalm.

The Ancient Israelites, the group of people who wrote the Psalms, had ideas about places where God would not be because of the culture they were in. In the ancient world, every nation had their own specific gods. And it was believed that the god of a nation was tied to that nation's land. In other words, gods were not portable, their reign and influence was limited to the location of their temples and the homeland of their people. So when you were an ancient person and your nation was conquered and its people sent into exile, it was thought that your god was defeated and unable to travel with you.

Many scholars think that the section of the Psalms right before the one Psalm 139 is in, Psalms 90-106, were written during the Ancient Israelites' experience of exile. In exile they had to grapple with these ideas about God's assumed limitations. It was a deeply distressing time, literally the Ancient Israelites' worst case scenario. It called into question what their identity was outside of their land and their temple rituals. It made them wonder if God had abandoned them.

However, contrary to what was widely believed in the ancient world, the experience of exile did not convince the Ancient Israelites that Yahweh was left behind in their homeland. But rather, they sensed that God went with them, even to their worst case scenario. They believed that God was present with them in exile, that God's love was bigger than any conquering army, and even bigger than what most people in their day and time believed God was like.

God surprised them with God's nearness in the last place they expected God to be. Nothing could separate them from the love of God. God was better, more loving, more compassionate, more present than they had originally thought.

God proved to be with the Israelites in a place that they did not expect. And that experience deeply transformed what they thought about God, themselves, and the world. Psalm 139 comes from the section of the Psalms that scholars believe were written after the Ancient Israelites returned from exile. It reflects how their theology and worldview had changed. It is a revelation that was birthed from their experience of exile, which I think gives it significant weight that it just wouldn't have if it did not come hard won from living out their worst case scenario.

In reckoning with my own sexuality, it is like I tried to jump right to verse 14. I thought, "I already believe gay people are fearfully and wonderfully made! So I can just start believing that for myself... right?" Except that I couldn't.

Not until I faced the homophobia that had internalized and crystalized within me without my knowing. Not until I experienced what it was like to ascend to peaks of queer community and be embraced in that love. Not until I traversed to the farthest limits of the sea where people who had known me and loved me were not able to accept this part of myself. Not until I faced the darkness that was in me, put there by a society that says queer people are sinful and wrong.

I couldn't just theologize about queer people being beloved in order to really believe it for myself as queer person. It was only through actually living the highs and the lows and the darkness and in going to the places where I was told God was not, that God surprised me with God's nearness in the last place I expected God to be. That is how I came to know that nothing could separate me from the love of God. That God was better, more loving, more compassionate, more present than I had originally thought.

*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.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.*

*My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

This is good news for us queer folks who still continue to face a lot of darkness and valleys out in the world, and in many churches. When culture pushes us to the furthest edges of the sea, when politicians try to legislate us away like they are trying to send us to Sheol, we find that God is still there, we cannot escape the Divine love that breathed life into us and continues to walk with us. There is nothing that can take that Love away, even if we feel like God has abandoned us and we have abandoned God. I wish gay folks did not have to face darkness and hate and dehumanization. It is not right and it is not good. And, even there, God is present and hemming us in in love.

I can't say I have arrived in believing this truth fully that the Psalmist proclaims with abandon. A lot of the time, this still seems too good to be true. It's an ongoing process of self-acceptance. I feel doubtful there's a final destination. Rather, I imagine it is just a continual peeling back of all the ways I have been taught to hate and distrust myself in order to believe that I am beloved. To embrace that we are deeply, irrevocably beloved by God, that is my prayer and my hope for myself and every queer person.

Celebrating Pride is about reclaiming the truth about who God is and about who we are. It is an affirmation of God's nearness in the places, and people, where we have been taught God is absent. It is a declaration that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is an insistence that God is better, more loving, more compassionate, more present than we originally thought.