

“Becoming Bold People of God’s Welcome”

Psalm 139

Sermon for ISCUCC Day of Discipleship 2025

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Focus: God creates each of us, fearfully and wonderfully. How can we affirm that not just in our words but in our actions?

I’m so delighted to be with you today. Some of you are dear friends from my time as a student at Eden Seminary in St. Louis, and others of you I’m just meeting for the first time. I bring you greetings from your siblings in Christ at the church I pastor, Union-Congregational Church in Waupun, WI, in the southern part of northeast WI. I’m making a whirlwind trip back home after today’s event so I can preach there in the morning, so your prayers for traveling mercies and sufficient caffeine are appreciated! I’m also bringing you warm greetings and thanks from my friends and colleagues on the UCC Disabilities Ministries Board, with whom I’m privileged to serve alongside.

Today we’re talking about Becoming Bold People of God’s Welcome. To get into that, let me start at the local Chinese restaurant about a mile away from Eden’s campus, and an ATM machine. I may be admitting my youth a little bit here, but at that time, I had never used an ATM machine. With my vision problems as a result of

cerebral palsy, I couldn't find the little slot where you put your debit card to get cash. Your very own Rev. Tarrah Vaupel was there with me, and is a fierce advocate of mine, and as much as she helps me, she also knows when *not* to help me. I hadn't asked for her help, so she was going to let me figure it out for myself. In many ways this was the correct response, because one thing many disabled people hate the most is people jumping in too quickly and rushing to help us if they think we're taking too long.

All was pretty normal until this random restaurant patron loudly said so everyone in the restaurant could hear, "are we just going to sit here and watch him suffer?"

Not "do you need help". Not "I'll pay for your dinner since you're a broke seminary student." But "are we just going to sit here and watch him suffer?"

Of course, in that moment I felt about two feet tall. Finally I called Tarrah over and she helped me with the ATM machine. And the truth was that I generally don't suffer with my disability. What I *do* suffer from is intolerant and people who treat me like a second-class citizen of our society, and the fact that sometimes the fortunes in my fortune cookies don't make sense.

Though if we're brutally honest with ourselves, I wonder how many of us and how many of our churches might not be far off from the attitude of that lady at the Chinese restaurant. How often have you heard someone in your church say "I don't need a microphone, I'll use my outside voice"? Or perhaps, "if you're depressed or anxious, maybe your faith isn't strong enough"?

All of this is, of course, ableist, and for a deeper dive into the terminology of "ableism", you can come to my workshop later! But part of the work of disability theology is fully understanding ourselves as fearfully, wonderfully beautifully made in God's likeness.

Which brings me to the text for today. Psalm 139 is one of my favorite psalms, because it talks about God, knowing us so deeply. In the song that I've been teaching us this morning, I focus mostly on verses 13 and 14. Those verses are rendered in our translation this way:

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;
that I know very well.

Some people don't get past the beginning of Psalm 139, because I think it's kind of creepy:

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

3

You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

4

Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.

Commentary after commentary on this text talks about God being inescapable. There's no way we can hide from God. But because of the broader message of the psalm, we're allowed to believe that that's not a bad thing. Because God knows us so well, because God knows us from even before we were born, God delights in us and makes us with love, worthy of awe and belonging.

But what if all of our churches could remind ourselves and each other that we are fearfully and wonderfully made in God's likeness? How would that change how we welcome one another into our worship spaces and our community life? God creates each of us, fearfully and wonderfully. How can we affirm that not just in our words but in our actions?

As you reflect today on “Becoming Bold People of God’s Welcome”, I ask you, I beg you, please don't let those

words just be buzzwords that you use for a catchy title for your day of discipleship event. Now more than ever, I think that churches need to understand that we, as human beings, need each other. God creates all of us in our particularities, with our particular gifts, challenges, and needs. We all have so much to offer because of how God made us. Because God made us so thoroughly and so lovingly, we all have so much to offer the world.

If we truly believe this, God calls us to do something about it, and to work to make it so.

This week, I invite you to dream with me.

Dream with me for a church, and a world, where wheelchair users and people with autism can be embraced in our church buildings, in our worship experiences, and in our public spaces.

Where stutters and slurred speech can become part of the understanding of what people who are loved by God sound like. Or maybe even what *God* sounds like.

Where people who look and act differently than we do are not looked upon with pity or disgust, but they're looked upon with love, and they're told, "you belong here."

Where there are elevators for every staircase, and there is health insurance for every condition, without the fear that it may be restricted, or worse.

Dream with me for a world where racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism, and any other discriminatory behavior is no more.

Instead, dream with me for a world where we come from all our particularities and witness to God's work in the world, so that God's work may be revealed through us. And then, let us do what we can to take the next steps towards peace, justice, and shalom for all. Amen.