

Psalm 139
God Got It Right
July 14, 2019
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Play this song after the scripture is read:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nJpevTefZA>

*Title Slide

When I listened to that song this week as I reflected on today's sermon, it caused me to think about the people in my life who believed in me, even when I had trouble believing in myself. They are the kind of people we should surround ourselves with. So, before we dive into this sermon, I invite you to join me in taking 10 seconds to think about the people who have helped you become who you are. The ones who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life. I will watch the time, beginning now.
(wait 10 seconds)

In 1977, this is the way Fred Rogers started his acceptance speech when he won the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Emmys. Actor and director, Tim Robbins, introduced him as "the best neighbor any of us ever had."

Play 0:00-2:42

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upm9LnuCBUM>

For many, many people who were children when Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was on television, Mister Rogers himself was one of the people who cared about them and wanted the best for them. I remember sitting in front of the television and feeling like he was talking especially to me when he said, "You are special." I didn't think he meant that I was more special than anyone else. Instead, he made me and countless other children believe that we had been entrusted

with something special to give to the world. And even on the days when I knew I hadn't been my best self that day, I heard him say, "I like you just the way you are."

Mister Rogers resonated with so many people partly because we each long to be seen and understood, on our best days and on our worst. Today's text, Psalm 139, is a well-loved psalm that tells us God created us, God sees us, God understands us completely, and mysteriously, God loves us exactly as we are. This psalm offers us a vision of God who is intimately connected to each one of us, yet still very much God, existing with us, around us, within us, and also apart from us, absolutely everywhere. The psalmist wrote, "I come to the end---I am still with you. I have to wonder if this psalm was on Paul's mind when he wrote, in Romans 8, "For I am convinced that neither life nor death, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, not height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Like the gentle words of Mister Rogers, Psalm 139 affirms our worth. We are treasured not because of what we have done or what we possess or what the world thinks of us, but because we were created by God. Our lives have worth that cannot be taken from us by other human beings, or even taken away by ourselves, because that worth was assigned to us by our Creator. In his book, *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember*, Fred Rogers talked about worth and identity. He wrote, "What's been important in my understanding of myself and others is the fact that each one of us is so much more than any one thing. A sick child is much more than his or her sickness. A person with a disability is much, much more than a handicap. A pediatrician is more than a medical doctor. You're MUCH more than your job description or your age or your income or your output." Yes, much more.

This is the good news that we are called to share with the world. It seems so simple really. Every one of us is worth everything to God. I think I've mentioned to you before that, when I was a youth minister, I led a Bible study for high school girls. It was really one of the best parts of my job. They were a truly amazing group of young women, with so much potential and so much to give to the world.

*One of the ways I reminded them of that was by telling them, "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it." And then I would remind them that if they believed that, and I wanted them to, then they also had to believe everyone else's picture was on it too. In other words, everyone is equally important to God. God loves every one of us just as fiercely as God loves the next person. Do we believe that? And if we do believe it, do we live as if we believe it?

I think we believe it. But as I look around at our community and the world, I see that we struggle with living it out. We give ourselves a lot of wiggle room when it comes to making decisions that honor the inherent worth of all human beings. I've even heard Christians twist the Bible and say things like, "Well, even Jesus said the poor will always be with us," as an excuse not to engage the suffering of poverty.

*Dr. Paul Famer, physician and co-founder of Partners in Health, which works to provide healthcare to impoverished countries, said, "The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong in the world." I agree with him. Every single systemic problem we are dealing with is, at its root, this: We value some people more than others.

I have a few examples. There are people in this country without access to affordable healthcare. They can't afford to go to the doctor or they can't afford the medication they need to keep them alive. It is this way not because we don't have the resources in our country to help them. It is because there are insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies making a lot of money off of sickness and we have not

insisted it stop. We have not made access to affordable healthcare a deal breaker politically. By not making sure people everyone has adequate healthcare, we have assigned more value to the lives of people with money than to the lives of people who don't have money.

Here's another example and it has to do with something we all love, food. We will use Bartlesville as an example, but certainly Bartlesville is not alone in this. Think, for a moment, about the layout of our community. Where, in Bartlesville, is the highest concentration of people who struggle to make ends meet? Where are most of the grocery stores located? And then when we add the challenge presented by insufficient public transportation, we can begin to understand the concept of a food desert. The term "food desert," very generally describes an area without access to healthy and affordable food. Most of us have transportation and are able to drive the distance from our homes to the store. But what if you couldn't? What if the only store within walking distance of your home was a convenient store or Family Dollar? How would that change your diet? How would that change your health? Again, is the health of people with money worth more than the health of people who are poor?

I can't talk about the inherent worth of human beings without talking about the immigrant and refugee children who are being kept in detention facilities. Picture in your mind a young person that you love, your child, your grandchild, your niece or nephew, one of the children in this church. I know many people in this country struggle with how and why the children came here, but really, do you believe the children we are holding in detention centers are as valuable as the children you love? They absolutely are. What we are doing to those children is immoral. And, as followers of Jesus, we cannot allow it. Call your legislators, both state and federal, tell them about the long-term damage we are doing to these children. As a nation, we need to take a good, hard look in the mirror and ask ourselves, if these were children

with white skin instead of children with brown skin, would this be happening? I believe with every fiber of my being that the answer is no.

At the root of racism is the belief that the lives of people of color are not worth as much as those of people with white skin. Sadly, racism has been part of the fabric of this country since the beginning when slaves were counted as 3/5 a person. Christians have used the Bible to support slavery and promote a culture of white supremacy for a very long time. Still today, white workers, on average, are paid more for the same work, than black people. Studies have shown that teachers tend to punish black students more severely than white students, perceiving the same misbehaviors as more dangerous and problematic in black students. All children, all students, all people have the exact same worth to God.

And the last example I will share is a story from the movie “Queers in the Kingdom” that the Bartlesville Film Society showed Friday night as part of the Pride festivities in our community. The film talked about the impact conservative Christian colleges have on LGBTQ+ students who attend them. The film highlighted alumni from Wheaton College in Illinois. Two women, both Wheaton alums, married, having just adopted a little boy, posed for a picture with the rest of the alumni at their class reunion. They were standing together with their son’s stroller in between them. The women were so excited that their family would be part of the reunion picture. When the alumni magazine arrived in the mail, one of the women excitedly opened the magazine at the mailbox, only to discover their son was not in the picture. He had been erased. It was as if he had never been there.

How painful that must have been. How painful it is for anyone to feel they are less than, like they don’t matter, like what they contribute to the world means nothing. We’ve made our faith so much harder than it has to be. I’m guilty of this too. I like to debate theology and split hairs

over what the original Hebrew or Greek said. I like to read the opinions of other theologians and pick their arguments apart. And sometimes, having those conversations is life-giving. I got a note this week from a member who thanked me for reading and explaining how I understand the passages in the Bible that people use as weapons against the LGBTQ+ community. For the first time, this person told me his is sure God truly loves him. He said our conversation saved his life. Good theology matters. But the bottom line is, everything we do has to be about love. We are called to recognize the God in each other and respond with love. That's all.

I will end today with the same words I ended with on Tuesday night at the Pride Worship service. You do not need the Church or Christians or your parents or your siblings or your childhood friends to tell you who you are. You know who you are. You are beautiful. You are gifted. You are special. And, dear ones, You are enough. Amen.