

March 2: Nature vs Nurture (Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help for Heavy Times”. This is our yearlong series, where we’re exploring passages from all parts of our Bible related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. Our desire is that as we walk this path and listen for God’s voice together, we might continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

This month, we’re beginning a new a miniseries focused on neurodiversity – on understanding, celebrating, and supporting the many different ways that people’s brains are wired, particularly those that diverge from what our culture labels as “typical”. As we dive in, our prayer is that we develop a deeper appreciation for the unique constellation of strengths and challenges inside our own brains and those of our neighbors, and learn how to help each other flourish as the persons we were created to be.

Before we begin, please take a deep breath with me and join me in prayer.

Creator God, you formed each of us in a unique way that reflects your own divine image – we are all fearfully and wonderfully made. Please help us to believe that about ourselves, and lead us in the journey of discovering and becoming our own essential selves. Search us, know us, and lead us in the way everlasting. In your name, amen.

About a year and a half ago, I spit into a little tube, screwed the top on tightly, and mailed it off so my DNA could be extracted and analyzed. I was curious and excited about uncovering the different places and cultures that shaped my ancestors and helped to make me the way I am. When the results finally came, there were no big surprises – just like I had always been told, the bulk of my DNA appears to have come from ancestors living in England and Finland. It was still fun to find out, though, and as a bonus, the company I used sent me a follow-up email a few months ago saying that they had also analyzed my DNA for over 40 different genetic traits, allowing me to explore how my genes might have influenced different aspects of my appearance and performance and personality.

And although I refuse to pay extra for their full report, I did log in to look at the results of the five traits they’re letting me see for free, and I discovered that my DNA suggests that I am more naturally determined (rather than adaptable); that I’m not a natural nap taker; that I have a quicker cardiac recovery rate

after exercise; and that I'm more of a night person. And although I'm unsure about being a night person, the other three traits feel like they accurately describe me. The fifth trait they analyzed, however, yielded a result that I have a serious problem with. The exact quote from the website is, "Heather, your DNA suggests you're less naturally strong." What? Honestly, I felt personally insulted when I read that, and I wanted to argue back – "Hey, DNA analyzers, didn't you know that when I was sixth grade, I could beat everybody in my class in arm wrestling, even the boys? And when I was in 11th grade, I tied for first place in a weightlifting contest between the girls in my class. *And* my little sister used to ask me to show off my muscles to her friends. How can you tell me I'm 'less naturally strong'? Let's arm wrestle!" But of course, the webpage I was looking at didn't respond to any of my questions or arguments, and it still reads exactly the same thing, every time I go to it – that I'm less naturally strong.

And so I'm left with questions. For as long as I can remember, I've believed that I am physically strong for my stature. But if the reported results of my DNA analysis are accurate (a big if), and I really am less genetically strong than the majority of people, how did I develop such a confident, lived-out belief in my own strength? I grew up in rural Bangladesh and all of the female role models around me were strong women – my mom had plenty of *sisu*, the Finnish word for inner strength that shows itself in outward fortitude, and she instilled it in me. I also grew up in a Bangladeshi culture in which women were routinely hidden away, abused, and kept powerless, and my pursuit of physical strength may have been a self-protective reaction, a desire to command respect and not be vulnerable. So if my physical strength is the result of nurture rather than nature, is being strong still an innate trait that describes me? If I'm truly less "naturally" or genetically strong, did winning a weight-lifting contest come from "unnatural" strength, or was it a fluke? Does it even matter whether physical strength comes from nature or nurture, and is there any practical benefit to knowing what my genetic, or "natural" traits might be?

These are just a few of the questions that reveal the complexities of interactions between nurture and nature, and how difficult it is to tease apart and identify what makes us into the people we are. How much is our fate decided by nature (our genetics); how much is decided by our nurture (the family and circumstances and culture we grew up in); and how much control do we have over who we become? Does each of us have an essential nature that is unique to us – and if so, is it static, or is it continually being formed based on

our nurture – the environment around us? What does it mean to become the person we were meant to be – is it a process of discovery and uncovering, or a process of self-determination and choosing the right path? What is hardwired into us, and what needs to be – or *can* be – changed or transformed?

None of these questions are new, even though our ability to analyze DNA and quantify nature versus nurture might be. They've been asked, in different ways, and by different people, since the dawn of human history.

Psalms 139 is one of my all-time favorite passages in the Bible, and I believe that the persons who composed and sang these words thousands of years ago wrestled with those same questions about identity and choice and becoming, and then responded – not with platitudes or trite answers, but with worship, with poetry that celebrates the wonder and mystery of our particular identities, created and formed and held safe by a loving God. And for the rest of my message today, as I talk about our essential natures and how we're formed, and what this all has to do with neurodiversity, I'm going to return to this psalm again and again, because I don't want us to lose the sense of wonder and worship that I believe centers and reorients us.

First, I believe that the foundational truth to every discussion about identity and personhood is that every single human being bears the image of God – there's something about who God is that is woven into the soul of every person, giving them innate worth and dignity, no matter what. And not only that, our essential selves, as human beings created by God, in all of our stunning diversity, are very good – God pronounced that right in Genesis 1, at the beginning of the Bible. The psalm we read today, Psalm 139, takes that basic truth and elaborates: "For you created my inmost being" (or my essential self), the psalmist sings to God, "you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Ps. 139:13-14). Each of us is "fearfully made" – not in a way that scares other people, but in a way that inspires awe and wonder, like crashing waves or the vastness of the sky on a clear, dark night, or a masterpiece of art that catches your breath.

Are you able to see yourself, in your essential, true nature, as "fearfully and wonderfully made"? Are you able to see other people like that? St. Augustine, way back in the 4th century, wrote that "we stand in awe of the ocean, the thunderstorm, the sunset, the mountains; but we pass by a human being

without notice even though the person is God's most magnificent creation." I challenge you to look at somebody this next week – either somebody you know, or somebody random, like the person checking you out, or the person you see in the mirror each day, and think about how fearfully and wonderfully made they are – how they personally bear the image of the Creator of the universe and reflect it back to you in a way that nobody else can. And see if it changes the way you see or interact with them.

But all of this wonder and glory and essential goodness that God has gifted us with is, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, contained within fragile jars of clay. We are created in the image of God, but we are not God. We are creatures, we are limited by time and space and knowledge and physical abilities and so many other things, we are mortal, and we are dependent on each other and on God. This is part of what we gather to remember on Ash Wednesday – we're made from the dust of the earth, and to that dust we will return. We cannot become whatever we want to be or do whatever we want to do, and all of our bodies are going to wear out in one way or another and succumb to death. This, too, is an essential part of our nature, of who we are, and it affects how we live. You hear this in Psalm 139 – the psalmist admits their own limitations and lack of control in the face of God. No matter where they try to go, even if they go up in space or lose themselves in darkness, they cannot escape from God's presence. *And* much of what God sees and knows is inaccessible to them, including their future, all the days "ordained" for them, which are already written in God's book – "such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain," the psalmist sings (Ps. 139:6).

We're not just fragile, though – we're broken. From the original sin in the Garden of Eden, our attempts to take the place of God and control things on our own terms have ended in disaster, for ourselves and our world. And so here's the third thing that I believe is true about all of our natures, no matter who we are: we all need to be healed, and we all live in a world that needs healing. We experience brokenness and suffering both through certain aspects of our genetic nature, and through our nurture – how we experience a broken world filled with broken people. And we perpetrate that brokenness with our own actions and responses. We *all* need to be restored to the goodness and wholeness and freedom that God intends for us.

But here's where things get difficult and tricky: figuring out what we need healing from. We live in a world and in a culture that has labeled and lifted up certain traits and abilities as desirable and "normal" and "good", and anybody who deviates from those is seen as broken and in need of healing. We aren't good at celebrating and accommodating differences, at seeing them as part of how somebody is fearfully and wonderfully made. And even when we are well-intentioned, we can make the mistake of identifying what might be part of somebody's particular nature as a problem that needs healing rather than an essential part of the person they are created to be, reflecting the image of God back to us in their own unique way. Sometimes the issue isn't that a person's nature needs to be healed and changed, but that our culture and environment needs to be healed and changed so that a person can flourish as they are.

For example, deafness is a trait that many people are born with, and it's often seen as a disability that needs healing or treatment, if at all possible, through cochlear implants or other methods. And there are people with deafness who would choose to hear if it was possible. However, there are many Deaf people who see it as an essential part of who they are – not a disability, but a core identity that adds to the beautiful diversity of the world. They argue that deaf people are just as capable as those who hear, and that the Deaf community safeguards an amazing culture and vibrant language. If a Deaf person is not able to flourish, perhaps it means that the majority culture and environment needs to be healed and change in order to be more inclusive.

This month, we're highlighting neurodiversity, and that term refers to the wide spectrum of differences in how people's brains think and work and are wired. In the neurodiversity framework, diagnoses like autism and ADHD aren't seen as pathologies to be healed or eliminated, but as identities to be understood, accepted, and embraced as a unique part of who a person is, fearfully and wonderfully made. There's a focus on the unique strengths that neurodivergent individuals bring to a community, rather than just the challenges they face.

It's not always simple, though, to discern where we need healing, and where we're being called to understand and embrace something about ourselves as an essential part of who we are. Often, it's both/and. We might find out that what we thought was a broken part of us is actually integral to who we've been created to be, and what we need healing from is the way our difference has been perceived and treated in a broken world. Everybody has their own individual journey, and we can't take the experience of one person and apply it

to everybody. We need wisdom. And this is where I want to bring us back to Psalm 139, where the psalmist begins with a statement of God's intimate, thorough *knowing* of them – "You have searched me, LORD, and you know me" and then ends with the same words, but in request from: "Search me, God, and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24).

I feel that the psalmist, at the beginning of the psalm, is acknowledging and marveling in God's full, loving knowledge of who they are, exactly as they are – but at the end, they're making a very specific request. They want God to know them in a very active way that they can respond to – to know their heart and their anxious thoughts and test them so that they can change and heal, so they can turn away from whatever is leading them down the wrong path, and reorient themselves to the way that leads to full and everlasting life.

As we do the work of becoming who we were created to be, of growing into our essential nature, I believe that we're going to make the most progress when we're walking in step with God, who created us and knows us, who calls us very good, in all of our individuality and diversity; and who sees our brokenness and dysfunctional ways and thoughts and wants us to be whole. No matter where we fall on the neurological spectrum – whether we're "typical" or "diverse", or carry a particular label, we need to invite God to search us and know us and point out where we need to change, how we need to reorient, where we need to be healed and transformed and seek forgiveness from God and others, *and* how we're invited to celebrate and live out the unique way we're made, and make space for others to flourish as they were created.

Our Ash Wednesday service is going to include a prayer labyrinth here on the floor. A labyrinth looks like a maze, but there are no wrong turns. As long as you stay on the path and keep moving forward, even if it feels and looks like you're going the wrong direction or circling back, you will reach the center.

I believe that each of us is created in the image of God, and that each of us is created to have full life and freedom and experience infinite joy – but that there is a journey involved in becoming the person we were created to be – and if you're hearing me now, you're still on that journey. You haven't arrived, and neither have I. We are all still becoming, and we all have the choice of how to take our next step on the journey.

And just like nature and nurture work together to shape and form us, I believe that our journey, and every step that we take – even the hard parts, and the suffering, and the broken things we don't choose that we have to respond to – each step in our journey shapes and forms us in a way that becomes part of who we are, just like Jesus' scars, from his journey with us, are a permanent part of who he is.

And sometimes it feels like that we've been going in the wrong direction, or the suffering or pain or the questions we have derailed us, and we have no idea who we are or who we are meant to be. But when we choose to take our next step with and towards God, we can trust that we're not lost. We are safe, and we will reach the center, and when we look back, we'll be able to see how God's presence and grace was there every step of the way, transforming and redeeming and reaching others through us. And as you choose your next step, may you hold that hope for yourself and those you love, and may that step bring all of us closer to becoming a community of gloriously diverse human beings who reflect God's glory to each other and live out God's love and justice in the world. Amen.