

## You Are God's Handiwork

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, & John 3:14-21

UMCOR Sunday – One Great Hour of Sharing

March 11, 2016 — 4th Sunday in Lent

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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### Numbers 21:4-9 (NIV)

<sup>4</sup> They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

<sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

### Ephesians 2:1-10 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

<sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

### John 3:14-21 (NIV)

<sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in Him is

not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

<sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

### You Are God's Handiwork

Is there anyone here who doesn't appreciate a nice compliment from time to time? A compliment truly is oxygen for the soul.

Let me tell you about a service on the web that is designed to lift you up when you are feeling down. It is called "Emergency compliment.com." You can go there and see brief messages to feed your ego and boost your mood. Who wouldn't like to be told things like "Your prom date still thinks about you all the time"? Or "You are someone's 'the one that got away.'" You'll find it there: "Emergency compliment.com."

The truth of the matter is that all of us need a little "pick-me-up" from time to time. Well, how about this little verse from St. Paul: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Think of that — "we are God's handiwork" — or as one scholar has translated it, "We are God's work of art!" When Paul says we are God's handiwork, he is not saying we are perfect. He doesn't even claim that we are better than other people. In fact he begins this passage by describing in detail what rascals we've been. He writes, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins..."

But then he writes, "But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ..." We are God's handiwork because of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. This is so important!

**WHAT YOU BECOME AS A PERSON IS DETERMINED TO A GREAT EXTENT BY HOW YOU SEE YOURSELF.**

As motivational speaker Zig Ziglar once said, "You cannot consistently perform in a manner which is inconsistent with the way you see yourself." We see that played out all the time in sports.

Even if you are not a fan of baseball, you will probably remember a former championship manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers named Tommy Lasorda. In an interview he did one time with baseball announcer Bob Costas, Lasorda confessed that in one of his first outings as a relief pitcher in the 1950s, he was so overcome with anxiety about pitching to certain players that he would deliberately try to balk. Imagine that, a pitcher deliberately trying to be called for a balk. Problem was, the umpires wouldn't call it. Lasorda was forced to face his fears and overcome them. But he learned from that experience.

Fast forward a few decades. Tommy Lasorda is now managing pitcher Orel Hershiser in his first year. Tommy wanted to improve Hershiser's self-perception of himself. The Dodgers were getting

ready to play the Braves and Tommy told Orel, “Tomorrow when Dale Murphy comes to bat and sees the name Orel, he’s going to laugh and then pound you deep. So I’m going to give you a new name — Bulldog.”

And the rest, as they say is history. Orel Hershiser, or Bulldog Hershiser as Lasorda called him, became a Hall of Fame pitcher. His most successful season came in 1988, when he set a major league record by pitching 59 consecutive innings without allowing a run. He helped lead the Dodgers to a championship in that year’s World Series, and was named his division’s Most Valuable Player as well as the World Series MVP. That season, he also won the National League’s Cy Young Award as the best pitcher in baseball. What you become as a person is determined to a great extent by how you see yourself.

One of the twentieth century’s great preachers, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote, “Hold a picture of yourself long and steadily enough in your mind’s eye and you will be drawn toward it.... Great living starts with a picture held in your imagination of what you would like to do or be.” That’s good advice.

#### LEARNING TO ACCEPT YOURSELF AND BELIEVE IN YOURSELF IS ONE OF LIFE’S MOST IMPORTANT BATTLES.

In 1971 Nancy Miller was a shy fifth-grader in Atlanta, Georgia, with a poor self-concept of herself. This poor self-concept came partially from the fact that she was born with only her pinkie fingers and two partial fingers on both of her hands. She was too embarrassed to learn square dancing because she didn’t think the boys would want to hold her hands. But through the encouragement of her P.E. teacher, who chose Nancy as his partner, she learned to accept herself and believe in herself. Today, Nancy Miller is a mother of four who plays the piano and types 65 words per minute — all because of a teacher who was there for her.

May I say that learning to accept yourself and believe in yourself may be a particularly difficult task for women. William Dorfman is a dentist to the stars in Los Angeles, California. He also donates his skills to a local women’s shelter, where he fixes the teeth of homeless women, prostitutes, abused women and children. One benefit of his work at the shelter is seeing the women develop a new sense of self-confidence once the work has been done on their teeth. As Dr. Dorfman says of his patients, “She becomes a new person because she sees a new person.”

Now why do I say this may be a more difficult task in our society for women? Studies show that starting in about fourth grade, boys tend to overestimate their school performance compared to how their teachers rate them; girls, on the other hand, tend to underestimate their performance. Why that is so I do not know, but it is.

Furthermore, boys tend to attribute their failures to back luck, the difficulty of the tasks, or not trying hard enough. Girls tend to attribute their failures to personal incompetence. This may be one reason why girls are more prone to depression.

Researchers note that “believing you are competent can be highly motivating, even when it’s not true. Conversely, believing that you are incompetent can undermine your motivation, even when it’s not true.” As it says in Proverbs 23:7, “As a person thinks in [their] heart, so [they are].”

I do believe we are doing better as a society in helping women value themselves, but we still have a way to go. And certainly there are many men who have a difficult time accepting themselves. You may or may not be aware, but one of the mysteries in our society right now is the increase in suicides among middle-aged males. Middle-aged men in the 45 to 60 age group experienced a 43 percent increase in suicide deaths from 1997 to 2014, and the rise has been even sharper since 2005. What does that say about our society? What challenges do these guys face that make them decide that taking their own life is the only way out?

THE PROBLEM IS THAT OUR SELF-IMAGE IS DETERMINED AT A VERY EARLY AGE, AND IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO UNDO.

Years ago, Parade magazine featured an interview with comedian Steve Allen and his wife, Jayne Meadows, on their many years together in marriage. Much of the article focused on Steve's unstable and dysfunctional family background. In a final comment about his childhood, Jayne said, "We are who we are because of where we've been." And that's true. "We are who we are because of where we've been."

Psychologists tell us that by the time we reach two years of age, 50 percent of what we ever believe about ourselves has been formed. Think about that, parents. Think of the importance of those first two years of life. By the age of six, 60 percent of our self-belief has been established, and by the age of eight, about 80 percent. By the time we reach the age of fourteen, over 99 percent of us have a well-developed sense, either correctly or incorrectly, of who we are.

Many years ago, there was a book about a special character named Bunker Bean. Bunker Bean was orphaned at a young age, and he grew up in a series of different foster homes. Consequently, Bunker had no self-esteem.

One day, a spiritual medium — a huckster — moved into Bunker's boarding house. The medium claimed that Bunker had been Napoleon Bonaparte in another life. Wow! Napoleon Bonaparte was powerful, intelligent, self-confident — the absolute opposite of Bunker Bean.

So Bunker began studying everything he could about Napoleon. As he studied, he began to take on some of his hero's positive characteristics. He became more self-confident, powerful, decisive, even intelligent. One day, this medium who had inspired Bunker was revealed to be an absolute fraud. But that didn't matter to Bunker Bean. By then, he had become the kind of person the medium had told him he could become. Our self-image is determined at a very early age and it is very difficult to undo. But that doesn't mean it is impossible!

IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO CHANGE YOUR SELF-IMAGE.

I know what some of you are thinking. You're thinking, "Pastor, you don't know me that well. I'm not worth anything. And it's too late for me to change."

One man said to his pastor, "You know how at big basketball games, when their team is ahead, the home fans sometimes taunt the other team by cruelly chanting 'Over-rated, over-rated'? Deep in my heart I hear that same taunt: 'Over-rated, over-rated.' There's no hope for me."

Oh, but there is hope! Remember Harry Emerson Fosdick's great statement, "Hold a picture of yourself long and steadily enough in your mind's eye and you will be drawn toward it.... Great living starts with a picture held in your imagination of what you would like to do or be."

May I suggest you add another picture to those already in your mind? It is a picture of Christ with a lamb in His arms. That lamb is you! Now picture Christ with His arms wide open, with a smile on His face. He wants to take you in His arms and let you know how special you are to Him. Picture Christ standing at a door knocking. That door where Jesus is knocking is your heart. He wants to come in and make you a new creation. It's not too late by the grace of God to change the way you think about yourself!

Virginia Mollenkott, a professor of English and a theologian, wrote that she loved to watch students come alive in her classes. "One of the courses I teach is freshman English, and that's a place where you can empower people. They often come to you beaten down.... Before I pass back their first graded paper, I give them a little speech: 'This grade is not for you. This grade is for a piece of work you turned in.' Then I ask them if they want to know what I think of them, and usually they want to. So I continue, 'I think you're made in the image of God and of inestimable worth....'

Then Virginia Mollenkott adds these words: "For me, the meaning of life is to share with people the wonderful news that we are the daughters and sons of God."

St. Paul writes: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...." Can you imagine that Jesus is saying that about your life? It makes no difference who you are. It makes no difference what you've done. It doesn't matter how many strikes are against you. You are God's work of art. With His help you can turn your mess into a masterpiece.

In one of his books Max Lucado tells us about a woman named Madam Fauna. Madam Fauna is a character in a John Steinbeck novel titled *Sweet Thursday*. Madam Fauna runs a brothel. In spite of her occupation Madam Fauna takes a liking to a prostitute by the name of Suzy and she sincerely desires a better life for this young woman.

One day Madam Fauna decides to set Suzy up on a real date with a man — not a client. She buys Suzy a nice dress and helps her get ready for the evening. As Suzy is leaving, she is visibly moved by Madam Fauna's kindness. She asks her, "You have done so much for me. Can I do anything for you?" "Yes," Madam Fauna replies, "you can say, 'I'm Suzy and no one else.'" Suzy does. Then Madam Fauna requests, "Now say, 'and I'm a good thing.'" And so Suzy tries. "I'm Suzy, and I'm a good..." And Suzy begins to cry. She couldn't say, "I'm a good thing." I wonder if anybody ever told Suzy that she is God's handiwork, that she is God's work of art? I hope someone finally did.

That great Christian philosopher and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem just one month before he was executed: "Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country-house. Who am I? They also tell me I would bear the days of misfortune calmly, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win. Am I really then all that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I know of myself, restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath... weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making, faint, and ready to say farewell to it all? Who am I? This or the other?.... They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine."

That is the ultimate answer to a poor self-image. To pray, “Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine.”

Learning to accept yourself and believe in yourself is one of life’s most important battles. The problem is that our self-image is determined at a very early age and it is very difficult to undo. However, it is never too late to change. Your new life begins when you understand that you are God’s handiwork — His work of art — and that God has a plan for your life. You put that plan in motion the minuet you accept Jesus Christ as your savior and let Him be in charge of your life and with His help follow Him. When that happens you will be on the path to being all God intends for you to be.

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