

“True Colors”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
e-Worship @Facebook Live  
10:30 am, June 28, 2020  
Pride Sunday

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Psalm 139:1-18  
Acts:8:26-40

A few times this past week, I have seen a video making the rounds on social media. It is a wonder! A YouTuber called “Creezy” made [The Swish Machine](#) which is basically a basketball shot that is anything but basic. The young man in the video shoots a hoop, and then after swishing through the hoop, the basketball begins a series of chain reactions in his back and side yards that includes every kind of garage item, forgotten sports equipment, playground toy, and gardening tool imaginable. A series of balls-- wiffle balls, soccer balls, basketballs, ping-pong balls, and finally another basketball goes through an obstacle course of ramps and slides and steps made of things like skateboards, rusted paint cans, a rolling rake, and a shovel on a pulley. There are 70 steps in all in this chain reaction, leading to the final event of another swish through a rusted, chain-link basketball hoop in the woods. Everything is video recorded in one take. Each time I watch the video, I am in awe of the persistence it must have taken to get this video right. I mean, when Kai and I shot the video for the postlude for today’s service, it took at least 8 takes, and the one we ended up with still starts with a giggle. I wonder how many times the creator of The Swish Machine failed when trying to piece this together.

In describing God’s work, the Psalmist declares, “I was... intricately woven in the depths of the earth.” I know evolution has a special purpose in our existence. It is random, and weeds out the weak, so that, on a grand scale, the strongest will survive. But on a more personal level, I like to think that, like the Psalmist imagines, God took great care in forming us. Like the YouTuber Creezy, God worked with precision and order, creativity and also joy and surprise in making us. I wonder if there were versions of us that weren’t going to work out, but God kept trying until getting it right, with us as the result.

We are now God’s living creation. And though the Psalmist proclaims, “In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them yet existed,” I don’t think the purpose of this Psalm is to portray God as a puppeteer, who engineers everything we are to experience and do before we have the chance to live it. What I see instead from this Psalmist is a powerfully intimate connection to God, which cannot be shaken no matter what our days may bring. “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.” No matter where we go, where we come from, how we look, or

who we love, we can never be strangers to God. God knows our true colors, and loves us not despite of this fact, but because of it.

“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” the Psalmist announces. Whether in our bodies or our minds, we all have those aspects of ourselves that are fearful, and those that are wonderful. It could be that the parts of ourselves we find most fearful, are fearful because they are so powerful. After all, the Bible repeatedly tells us to fear what is holy.

On this day, when traditionally millions of people all over the world march both in celebration of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer community, and also in protest against the discrimination our communities still face, we are stuck close to home. We cannot be with the full rainbow of people-- we are like reds without yellows, and greens without oranges or blues, and purples without brown and black. And so, it is especially important to name the sacred worth of our LGBTQ siblings, as beloved, and fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God.

In her poem, “Phenomenal Woman,” Maya Angelou wrote:

I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size

But when I start to tell them,

They think I’m telling lies.

I say,

It’s in the reach of my arms,

The span of my hips,

The stride of my step,

The curl of my lips.

I’m a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That’s me.

Maya Angelou was an African American woman who held the honor of Poet Laureate of this country. Though she wrote this poem in 1978, decades before the phrase “black girl magic” came to popularity, clearly this was something she possessed, and passed on to others as she modeled black excellence and empowerment. In a time when we are deeply focused on the oppression of brown and black people, it is also important to celebrate with joy their giftedness, excellence, and belovedness.

In the Acts passage from today, an African man-- early church father Ireneaus named him Simeon Bachos, and Ethiopian Orthodox tradition calls him Bachos-- from Ethiopia, a eunuch in service to the Candace, which is the title of the Ethiopian Queen, enters the scene. Because he is the Candace’s Secretary of Finance, he is a steward of great wealth-- though it is not his own. He’s driving a chariot and reading the scroll of Isaiah as he rides-- I guess the traffic wasn’t so bad then, so it wasn’t like texting while driving. Because Bachos is reading from Isaiah, I am going to suppose he was already a Jew; Ethiopians trace a visit of the Queen of Sheba-- a

queen of the ancient Ethiopian empire's reach-- to the palace of King Solomon as a moment of history that brought the practice of Judaism into Ethiopia-- which in biblical times included African lands south of Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Although the Torah excluded eunuchs in Deuteronomy 23:1, because of their sexual difference, from entering the assembly of the Lord for prayer, the prophet Isaiah-- which Bachos is reading-- reverses that rule: "To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters' I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.... These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer'... Thus says the Lord, who gathers the outcasts of Israel" (Isaiah 56:4-5, 7-8a).

Phillip saw that faithfulness, and engaged Bachos' questions, and proclaimed to him the good news of Jesus Christ. Philip did not seem to waste any time asking Bachos-- an outsider because he was African, because he was a servant, and because he was sexually different-- to justify his belonging before God. That was implicitly understood. Instead, when Bachos noticed a pool of water along their journey and asked, "Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip went down and baptized him, welcoming Bachos as a member of Jesus' body. After that Bachos went on his way, rejoicing. That kind of curiosity for God, eagerness to participate, and joyful response are some of the spiritual gifts that Bachos, and many other LGBTQ people, add to the church, and whether you are queer or straight, these are qualities that we can all try to embody for a fuller experience of delight in the presence of God and the community of Christ.

On that day on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, an Ethiopian eunuch was baptized, and though the scripture does not mention his name in these verses, we can bet that God was speaking their name, saying "This is my beloved."

We meet today for another sacrament, that of Communion. This sacrament acknowledges that we are broken, but even in our brokenness, we are made to be the Body of Christ. This body extends beyond the boundaries of race and gender and sexuality, beyond the borders of these church walls and beyond the limits of our computer screens and tablets. Even at the farthest limits of the sea, this is a body that will stretch to reach you, and name you, and love you, and you will not be cut off. Let us share in that promise; though we are separate, the Spirit weaves us-- and all the colors we bring-- together.

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<sup>1</sup>Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi, "Living Water: Bible Study Acts 8:26-40" World Council of Churches, July 15, 2013