

*Image Bearers*

Psalm 139 and John 1:43-51

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*A whole new you!*

*A Path to Transformation.*

*Secrets to a successful new year.*

*You can start again!*

Who has not clicked on any such promise while scrolling Facebook or reading the *New York Times*?

We are creatures who love to believe that the way things are today are not the way things have to be tomorrow whether it is the number of inches needed for a tape measure to completely circle our waistlines, the amount of money accumulating in our savings account, or the depth of connection we feel with spouse or friend.

Early last week, my attention was captivated by a question posed by *The Guardian* on Instagram. “Are you looking for more health and happiness in the year ahead—without having to work too hard?”

“Umm. Yes.” I thought to myself as I clicked on the image uncovering “45 Tiny Changes to Transform Your Life.”

I did a relatively quick reading of the list before noting how I had already mastered a couple of the changes including “Leaving your phone out of your bedroom at night,” “Keeping a list of what you’ve read,” and “Lighting candles.”

I then noted how one or two of them seemed rather odd to me—like “Brushing your teeth standing on one foot,”

Other changes were filled with wisdom I not only need, but changes that when embodied, have the power to change everything. In fact, I decided I appreciated the list of 45 tiny changes to transform your life enough to craft a sermon series around them starting with change number 15 which reads, “Believing everyone is interesting and attractive.”

Can you imagine a disposition in which you marvel at how interesting and attractive everyone is no matter where you are or who you encounter?

Ponder with me for a moment walking into a staff meeting for which you would typically do anything to convince your boss to read Priya Parker’s book, *The Art of Gathering*, before summoning you to a board room again. Instead of imagining how you dread such forced encounters, imagine showing up with an eagerness that propels you to be the first person to arrive because you cannot wait to be surrounded by a roomful of interesting and attractive individuals.

Or perhaps you can imagine a train full of tourists getting off the Metro with you, individuals who are clearly new to town because they do not yet know that we stand to the right and climb to the left when going up an escalator. *Ahh, look at all of these interesting and attractive young people!*

Is such a stance even possible?

Could we embody this approach day in and day out?

I contemplated stopping here and inviting you to turn to a stranger and say, “You are interesting and attractive,” and then quickly realized how uncomfortable that would be because we are not trained to approach each person as beautiful, let alone beloved.

We live in a world in which we can easily be led to believe that some people are unworthy of our attention and not individuals who might fill an hour of our day with more interesting conversations than we have had in a spell.

And while I am not convinced I am capable of believing every person is interesting and attractive, I know such a belief is impossible without the lens of my faith—a faith that begins with God creating every person in God’s image, a faith that leads me to believe how every single person has been fearfully and wonderfully made, a faith that convicts me to imagine God saying “This is my child, my beloved,” about every one of us, a faith in which I seek to follow Jesus who sees each person with a depth of compassion that elicits the very best in all of us.

The fourth gospel begins not with angels hovering over a manger providing shelter to a newborn being held by its surprised father and virgin mother but instead with sentences steeped in theology about the Word that was in the beginning. Unlike the synoptic gospel writers who take us to the banks of the River Jordan where we are given a front row seat to Jesus’ baptism, the fourth gospel writer tells us about John the Baptist who then introduces Jesus, the Word that was God, as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” John then tells us about his baptism before introducing Jesus to two of his disciples—Andrew and Simon Peter who leave John to follow Jesus. These two men then encounter Philip who accepts the invitation to follow Jesus without hesitation. Philip then finds Nathanael and exclaims how they have found the one about whom the prophets wrote before adding how Jesus is the “son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

Jesus is the son of a blue-collar carpenter, not a royal king.

Jesus is from the small-town Nazareth and not the royal city of Jerusalem.

And Nathanael has not yet been taught to believe that everyone is interesting and attractive because these two details about Jesus’ family and place of identity are enough for Nathanael to want to dismiss him as he asks, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*”

I wonder if you have ever spoken a similar sentiment.

Can anything good come out of Mexico?

Can anything good come out of the Palestinian territory?

Can anything good come out of Israel?

Can anything good come out of *that* political party?

Can anything good come out of *that* neighborhood?

Can anything good come out of *that* religion?

Who have you dismissed after learning or assuming you know something about their life or identity?

Philip hears the question and invites Nathanael to discover the answer on his own.

*Come and see.*

The pair set off and meet Jesus who not only greets Nathanael with intentional positive regard, but also names Nathanael’s righteousness.

Jesus fully sees Nathanael. “I saw you under the fig tree.”

This seeing allows Jesus to name the core of Nathanael’s identity. “You are an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

And Nathanael, in turn, sees the fullness of Jesus' identity. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

What might happen if we sought to see every person the way Jesus sees us?

What would it take for us to believe every person is interesting and attractive—or better yet, as the Psalmist says, fearfully and wonderfully made—instead of dismissing them because of their race or sexuality? Or their social, cultural, or political location?

What might the world look like if more people were willing to step into a life where we not only want grace to flow toward us but in which grace flows from us?

Last week I was sharing a conversation with one of our members who described the impact Lee's practice of reading Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail in small group every MLK Day has had on her. She provoked me to return to the letter Dr. King penned in August of 1963 in response to eight white religious leaders who suggested that Dr. King be more cautious in how he responded to the evil of segregation. Listen to what the antithesis of approaching every person as though they are interesting and attractive sounds like:

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"...

Imagine how much petrifying trauma and years of systemic oppression could have been avoided if we remembered that every person is fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God.

Imagine how much racism could be erased if we approached every person with intentional positive regard, believing we are all interesting and attractive.

Imagine what might happen if we allowed the Bible to be our mirror as Dr. King did time and again. In his book, *The Preacher King*, Richard Lischer describes what happened on the night the Supreme Court ended bus segregation and 8000 people gathered in two churches in Montgomery, Alabama. "At the first service, Lutheran pastor Robert Graetz, the only white clergyman in town who joined the Montgomery Improvement Association, was appointed to read" 1 Corinthians 13.

You may know that chapter of the Bible as the love chapter, the one that begins with “Love is patient. Love is kind.”

“Before he rose to read, Ralph Abernathy (Dr. King’s close friend and mentor) whispered to him, ‘Read it like you’ve never read it before. Put everything into it.’”

Put everything into how you read, “love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.”

Dr. Lischer writes how “When Graetz came to the words, ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things,’ the congregation burst into spontaneous applause and cheers.”<sup>1</sup>

What if every white pastor not only read the love chapter like they have never read it before, but encouraged their congregation to live this chapter like never before, modeling what it means to put away childish things in a way that not only allowed the oppressed to burst into spontaneous applause but to be set free?

We have made significant progress since Dr. King was assassinated nearly fifty years ago. But there is still a long way to go when it comes to all persons being set free to fully live the life God has created us to live.

Who do you need to “come and see” instead of keeping your distance or judging from afar?

Imagine.

Imagine what might happen if we saw everyone the way Jesus sees us.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 218.