



<b>Series:</b> Animate	<b>Reference:</b> Psalm 139:13-14 & Various Passages	<b>Title:</b> Forming Me	<b>Date:</b> 10.29 .17
<b>Website Writeup:</b>			
Last week we looked at our image of God which needs to come into alignment with the true image of God from the Scriptures. This week we look at how that image influences our image of self as we seek to understand how God continually forms us into the likeness of Christ.			

### Color changes in text indicate slide changes

#### -SLIDE PERSON: PLEASE RECORD THE SERMON-

Thanks to Greg Boyd & Woodland Hills Church, we've used many of his words, ideas, and the Animate booklet from their series by the same name - in all the Animate series there are just too many of Greg's words to footnote - thank you Greg! Imitation is flattery brother!

Animate - to bring life. We've discussed the use of our imagination in the area of Truth. Finding the Inner Sanctum, the place where we meet with Jesus & are transformed. Old Christian stuff - neuroscience confirms, mind & heart are one. The mind, literally changed in prayer as new neural connections are made. Paul wasn't crazy saying let your minds be renewed - they literally are. We've looked at how we operate out of a concrete image of God in our minds which may or may not differ with what we say we believe. Or, what we say we believe isn't really what drives us, but this image does; what we experience as reality dictates our response to life - today we'll look at how that image of God influences our image of self - so this sermon is aptly entitled *Forming Me*.

Before we start, let's read an excerpt from an article in the NY Times entitled, *The Benefits of Church* by T.M. Luhrmann. It says this... *"Any faith demands that you experience the world as more than just what is material & observable. This does not mean that God is imaginary, but that because God is immaterial, those of faith must use their imaginations to represent God. To know God in an evangelical church, you must experience what can only be imagined as real, and you must also experience it as good.*

*I want to suggest that this is a skill & that it can be learned. We can call it absorption: the capacity to be caught up in your imagination, in a way you enjoy. What I saw in church as an anthropological observer was that people were encouraged to listen to God in their minds, but only to pay attention to mental experiences that were in accord with what they took to be God's character, which they took to be good.*

*I saw that people were able to learn to experience God in this way, and that those who were able to experience a loving God vividly were healthier — at least, as judged by a standardized psychiatric scale. Increasingly, other studies bear out this observation that the capacity to imagine a loving God vividly leads to better health.*

*For example, in one study, when God was experienced as remote or not loving, the more someone prayed, the more psychiatric distress she seemed to have; when God*



*was experienced as close & intimate, the more someone prayed, the less ill he was. In another study, at a private Christian college in Southern California, the positive quality of an attachment to God significantly decreased stress & did so more effectively than the quality of the person's relationships with other people."*

Think about his words as we talk today. Let's pray... **(Start SCULPTOR VIDEO for the remainder of the sermon as background for text)**

Truth needs to be incarnated, made flesh, to become a concrete reality in our heart-mind. Sculptors & other visual artists illustrate this for us; a mental image being formed in paint, stone or clay. As you think about that, think about how God forms you. *Let's start with Genesis 2:7 - 7 Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*

Man, animated by this intimate close act of God forming & breathing into his nostrils. Psalm 139:13-14 - *13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.* He praises God for how wonderfully God made him. Your grandmother knitted - an intimate act absorbing all attention. God's works (us) are wonderful. God absorbed in knitting & when finished, he says, "That's very good." Like the artist finishing a beautiful painting or drawing, at some point you stand back & say, "That's good. If I add one more stroke it'll be too much!"

Last week we said our relationship with God is mediated by our image of God. Our emotions associated with the concrete representations of God in our mind. To some degree we have twisted false images of God. So, it's no wonder we're passionless in faith when our image of God is false. But, sometimes those images are fairly good as shaped by our experience. For instance, it's easy to accept God's grace if your father was gracious growing up. But, if your father was abusive & abandoned your family, it may be a constant struggle accepting God's love, or believing he won't abandon you. You may be full of anxiety, and always trying to prove yourself.

So we have this image of God formed by cognitive belief & life experience. And a self-image formed also out of the crucible of life. They're intimately linked. One of the reasons we have trouble celebrating who we are, living in confidence, being satisfied, or feeling & experiencing love & grace is because we've developed unlovable self-images. But we're to love ourselves. Not in a narcissistic way, but in a maturely confident & humble way. *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

But things happen to us, experiences bring negative messages which root into our heart-mind; we allow them to define us. Experiences form self-image. If the experience is positive & true, good. If it's false & negative, bad. For instance, as a child my parents praised my artwork, forming a positive image of my creative self, which I've never doubted.



In comparison, a friend of mine's mother was capricious; one minute kind, another hurtful & angry. Abusive with her language. Destroying her daughters belongings in fits of rage. What message does that leave a child? Authority's arbitrary, dangerous, mean - those who are supposed to love & protect, suddenly turn & hurt you. Trust is impossible. What image of God does that leave? A capricious untrustworthy angry god whom you have to walk on eggshells around, and is impossible to please. And what does a person become in that environment? Neurotic, full of shame, frightened, distrustful, unable to accept love, self-loathing, etc. Their God & Self-Image, false & intertwined.

So, even if I read my Bible everyday & believe the 'right things' about God as an adult, what I experience to be true in the concrete experiential images of my heart may be different. The same goes for my self-image, I know I shouldn't carry those things from childhood but I constantly live out of them. You might not want to be a people-pleaser even though you grew up in an environment which developed that - should learn to say *no*, but just knowing that information doesn't override the images of self which drive it.

Some women believe they exist as sex toys for men due to a distant, or abusive father. Some people feel fated to be a failure, unimportant, can never fully trust or love someone, only get value by success, or will always be in bondage to an abusive relationship or addiction due to the negative forming experiences of life. But you can't love *that* person - that unhealthy, needy, idolatrous self-image is unlovable! Because it's not the reality you should be living in - it's not the truth about you. And blaming others doesn't help. As an adult you're called to submit yourself to God's transformative work on that self-image.

How do we not only cognitively know, but live in the reality of who we are in Christ?

Firstly, as we read these verses realize, you're a masterpiece. God's forming & sculpting you now. Like an artist with each stroke of pastel, starting from blank page. God formed you from nothing, and is continually working. God created you. But he didn't just create you & then leave you to life. He knitted you together, and is currently absorbed in every detail of forming you still, like the artist at the canvas or the sculptor at his clay.

Sculptors get clay in their pores & under their finger nails. They smell like clay when they sculpt. The artist gets pastel on her fingers as she pushes the color into the paper & moves it around. Pastel residue on her hands. It's a visual image of what happens each second of your life with God's sculpting hands; sustaining you, giving you breath, whispering in your ear. Transforming you.

However, we usually have a very disconnected image of God. He formed us we agree, but in our image after initial formation he detaches, leaving us to the dogs. We get chewed up, there's no sculptor to reshape us as we simply wait for Jesus to return.

*Romans 8:28 tells us that...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* Very positive message! Cognitively, informationally I know it's true. But notice, it's an active ongoing image of



God. It's possible to believe it cognitively, and never concretely experience the intimacy of God working for your good now. What's your image of God? What's your self-image in light of Jesus? They're intertwined; we're made to be in fellowship with him. In him, we find real worth & value. To the extent my image of God is askew, my image of self is askew. The truth is, God's constantly involved in my formation & says to me, "You're my child, my work of art. I'm not an abstract philosophical thought. I'm here, shaping & forming you - getting my hands dirty as I sculpt your mind & heart."

Realize too that a piece of art is an extension of the artist. Often times when doing a portrait of someone it'll come out resembling the artist - artists tend to work ourselves into the images we create. God's an artist leaving his imprint on us; made in his image. Yet I'm still a unique masterpiece! Being made into Christ's likeness doesn't mean I lose my personality, I simply take on the goodness of his character & heart.

Usually in our image of God we have him limited to some cosmic plan which doesn't deviate. However, his involvement with us is an act of intimacy & constant interactivity. Think of the story of Abraham with Sodom & Gomorrah where God's mind's changed. His 'plans' with a small 'p' change. His 'Plan' with a capital 'P' doesn't. We affect him & he us. Hands on. Interpersonal - Some believe God, in the potter-clay analogy, has coercive unilateral control over the clay; he makes it, forms it & that's it. That no matter what happens in life that clay is exactly how God shaped it to be. Which would make God responsible for the evil marks left on us - the mark of rape or abuse for example.

In our image of God, He makes some for heaven & some for hell - fashioning everyone then stamping some to go to hell, and then to the rest & says, "Be thankful that's not you." Where's the justice & love in that image? And when we ask that question of others, the usual response is *Romans 9:20-21...<sup>20</sup> But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" <sup>21</sup> Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?*

Other versions translate 'special purpose' & 'common use' as a 'vase for flowers' & 'a pot to cook beans in' or 'a jar for decoration' & 'vessel for throwing garbage into'. But all translations communicate, both vessels are useful items. Some more than others, but not how you'd think - get rid of your decorative jar & your trash can, which would you miss most? It's not saying one will be kept & the other thrown out, or one will go to heaven & one to hell.

In context, that passage means the exact opposite of what we've probably been taught. Let's take it in light of *Jeremiah 18:3-6* where the writer uses the same imagery: *...I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. <sup>4</sup> But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. <sup>5</sup> Then the word of the Lord came to me. <sup>6</sup> He said, "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel."*



The potter's working, there's a mar, he reforms it into a new creation. This Potter image, compared to ours, is an accurate image of God. He's skillful & caring, reworking the clay if it's not reflecting the image he has for it. God's free to change his mind. In this Jeremiah passage God's bringing judgement on Israel due to their disobedience. But there was always time to turn & repent. God's free to change his mind concerning blessing & judgment. There's nothing fatalistic, nor final, about God's prophecy of judgement in this context - God was constantly saying to Israel, "If you turn & repent I'll heal your land!" In verse 12 the Israelites voice a fatalistic view, much like ours. Their attitude was, "We're done for, God has pronounced judgement, there's no hope!" God had prophesied against them, but there was always opportunity for change. Remember, Jonah preached judgment on Nineveh—but the people listened, repented & were spared. Christians aren't fatalists, there's hope for change.

So the potter-clay analogy isn't a unilateral control over the clay, where he forms one for heaven, one for hell, leaving them both to be chewed up by life until he returns. No choice, no life & interaction. Rather, it's about Gods incredible flexibility with the clay, his constant forming hand in our life, and the response of the clay in his hands. The interpersonal interplay between Father & child.

The question is, do I respond, or not? All of us are marred, born into sinful nature. Physically, psychologically, or emotionally marred. Or all three. Born into this corrupted state, and the evil acts of others feed into our formation. Remember, we're all formed spiritually, the question is how? Well or badly? God grieves over that, but the marks don't affect his love for us, or his attention to detail, or his ability to create something beautiful out of the clay of our lives. He can rework it, transforming you into a masterpiece. We judge what's good & bad in people (they're sexy, smart, successful, or aren't). But God sees the clay; what he can make of you - he takes all the faults & weaknesses & works them out while working his love in.

As a sculptor I'd splash water on my clay as I worked to keep it pliable. When it dries out it becomes hard - however it can always be reconstituted by immersing it in water. It's like Gods splashing his love onto us, working it in, keeping us malleable. He confronts the wounds & scars & works his love in as we absorb it.

Even when we grow dry at times, he reconstitutes us with his love! As a matter of fact, we're baptized in his love as if we were hard dead clay, but he immersed us in his love at the cross of Calvary & our hearts were made soft & workable again. Michelangelo, who was really a sculptor & not a painter, said, "*Every block of stone has a statue inside it - its the task of the sculptor to discover it.*" And about a particular statue he said, "*I saw the image of an angel in the marble & carved until I set it free.*" He's saying, he doesn't really form something out of the rock, but releases the image he sees in the rock. To do so he must take away what doesn't belong. An artist drawing, erases lines & smudges which aren't conducive to the portrait. What shouldn't be there she takes away so the portrait reflects the person.



God takes away all the things inconsistent with the image he has for our lives. Maybe all the other people can't see the masterpiece which is you, maybe they just see a block of stone. Doesn't matter - God sees beauty in you. Maybe everyone only sees the mars & mistakes. Who cares? God sees potential, what he can make of you. A work in constant process. That lie which says you'll always fail, God will chip away. That lie which says you as a woman need the approval of men, God will knead out of you. Everything inconsistent with who God created you to be taken away. God working it out by working in his love. And that's assured - *Romans 8:29 tells us that we are predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. Philippians 1:6, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

How do we start to live with this right self-image? Firstly, meeting Jesus in our Inner Sanctum is an avenue for healing. As you do, imagine God embracing you with a big fatherly hug & he says, "I'm sorry for the guilt & wounds you've lived with, I'll never do that to you. I love you no matter what." Theoretically we know these things as adults, but someone has to convince that hurt little kid within us whose growth has been stunted & continually lives in the lie.

Secondly, we need to practice the presence of God. We tend to hyper-spiritualize ourselves & God - it's simply not true that he likes our spiritual side more than our physical - we're body, soul & spirit. Inseparable. God loves us as flesh & blood. Communities wrapped around bodies, wrapped around individual souls. He's right here right now. An artist may love to work with pastels - God loves to work in us.

*Acts 17:28 says, <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'* Let's be aware, God's loving presence, expressed most clearly on Calvary, envelopes you now - closer than your own skin - he's the atmosphere we swim in; moment by moment he fashions you, fully absorbed in shaping that masterpiece which is you right now. Respond to his touch. As he kneads the lies out of the clay of your life. As he works the warmth of his love into you with strong, experienced, sculptors hands....

Let's practice the presence of God now as we listen to a poem by Terri Churchill found in your Animate booklets. Listen, in a prayerful attitude while watching the sculptor on the screen, or with eyes closed as Katie Boghal reads for us. And as she does, think about how God formed & is continually forming you now. Think of the pleasure he takes in you.



## **THE WAY YOU LOVE ME**

sometimes i think of you  
forming me from nothing-  
shaping tendon and muscle and bone  
to cover the vulnerable places in me.

i think of you  
absorbed in the details-  
using your fingers to  
tenderly  
draw the contours of my  
body.

i think of you bending over me  
to breathe life into my lungs-  
the intimacy of your breath  
in my mouth.

this is how you have loved me  
from the moment you  
dreamed a dream of me.

this is how you love me  
even now  
as you swim in my veins  
and whisper in my ear.

you are the secret  
i carry in my body.



## Community Group Questions

**Ice Breaker:** What's one thing you love about yourself, and one thing you'd change?

**Opening Prayer:** Remind them the sermon centered on the right (orthodox) image of ourselves as it relates to a right (orthodox) image of God. Then have two people ready to read Psalm 139:13-14, and also, *The Way You Love Me*, from our Animate booklet.

Instruct the group to listen to these two things in a prayerful attitude, then if anyone wants to respond in prayer to these two things they can with one of you closing it out in a few moments.

### Discussion:

1. Can anyone recall details from the sermon which struck them? Let them answer this before going on to the points & questions below...
  1. Our self images are formed by life experiences, interactions with others (positive & negative), what we read, are told, war, poverty, affluence, abuse, education, etc. They can be good or bad.
  2. Some of these experiences reinforce self-images which are good, true, and fall in line with a Biblical World View, while others reinforce false & damaging self-images.
  3. Can you share, either personally, or of someone else you've known, guarding anonymity of course, experiences which may have formed the person positively or negatively? Think - family relationships, friends, bullying, abuse, encouragement, praise, accomplishment, firing, divorce, love relationships, fights, etc.
  4. What longterm effects do these things have on a person? (Sort of living with the emotional arrows still embedded in our souls)
    1. Can you describe some of the ways a person may operate with others, or in life choices as a result of these positive or negative experiences?
    2. How do some live out of their wounded-ness, instead of a healthy self-image?
    3. How does a persons living out a false (unbiblical) self-image effect others around them (community).
  5. What does this statement mean to you, "*We are underserving of God's grace, but worthy of it at the same time.*"
  6. In thinking of how we've been formed, and our self-image in light of Jesus, what do these verses mean to you? And do you believe them? (assign each verse to different people to read out loud, and discuss them one at a time)
    1. **Romans 8:28** - *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*
    2. **Jeremiah 18:3-6** - *I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. <sup>4</sup> But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. <sup>5</sup> Then the word of the Lord came to me. <sup>6</sup> He said, "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.*
    3. **Romans 8:29** - *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.*
    4. **Philippians 1:6** - *Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*
2. We spoke too of how we have wrongly believed God created us, set things in motion, then detached himself.
  1. How is that false view damaging, or unhelpful?
  2. What is the proper view & why? (God's in constant interaction with his creation. Working on it & loving it as time goes on.)
  3. Is it helpful to view God as an artist always working on you as his masterpiece?