

I am not what I do

Steve Matthews

For use with devozine meditations for June 24–30, 2013.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

“For the past five years I have been working as a self-employed consultant, focusing on supporting church structures that utilize a discernment approach to ministry. I love what I do, and I feel a sense of call to the work; but when someone asks the question, ‘So what are you doing now?’ or ‘What is your profession?’ I feel anxious about how to answer. Since I don’t have a title like ‘doctor’ or ‘youth minister’ or ‘marketing executive,’ I sometimes feel the need to describe my work as if to justify its importance to well-meaning people.

“I often feel a sense of insecurity about my identity. The formula for success in our culture seems to include some right combination of gender, race, education, income, marital status, sexual orientation, social connections, weight, age, religion, physical ability, and so forth. Even so, when I slow down and pay attention, I know I am more than the sum of my parts. Fortunately, my insecurity doesn’t bite me all the time. When it does, I am often able to remember that those self-defeating voices are not coming from God; neither are they the voices of my core identity. I know deep inside that who I am as a human *being* matters far more than who I am as a human *doing*. My truest identity is that I am God’s beloved. As the late Grady Nutt said in his book, *Being Me* (<http://www.amazon.com/Being-Me-Grady-Nutt/dp/0805469095>), “I am a person of worth, created in the image of God to relate and to live.” While I may not be all that the culture deems a success, the source of my life, the stream that feeds my being, flows from God’s love, compassion, and promise and nourishes the real person I am and the person I am becoming.”
—Steve

MEET THE WRITER

Steve Matthews was a youth minister for more than fifteen years. At present, he is living in central Virginia on a small farm with a cat, a dog, and sixteen chickens. He loves growing his own food as well as cooking and eating it. Steve is working as a spiritual director and a consultant in the area of “Contemplative Approaches to Ministry.” He was also a writer for *The Way of Pilgrimage: An Adventure in Spiritual Formation for the Next Generation*.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles or copies of Psalm 139:1–14
- markers
- large sheets of paper or newsprint:
 - + On one sheet write: *“fearfully and wonderfully made”* vs . . .
 - + On another sheet write this quote:
“I am a person of worth, created in the image of God to relate and to live.”
—Grady Nutt, *Being Me*
- index cards—write on separate index cards each of the instructions for group discussion in “Exploring the Word”
- pens
- copies of the closing prayer

PLUGGED IN

- + As people arrive, you might choose to show this commercial from CitiBank about identity theft (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KERwnA8VfFM>) as a light-hearted way to introduce today’s lesson.
- + You might also choose to show one of the following movie clips from “Wing Clips.” In this clip from *Rango*, the main character develops a new identity when he feels threatened by strangers (<http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/rango/names-rango>). In this clip from *Seabiscuit*, the racehorse has been so beaten up that he has forgotten what it means to be a horse (<http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/seabiscuit/how-to-be-a-horse>). Both clips deal with issues of identity.
- + Finally, the song “Who I Am” by Jessica Andrews reminds us that community and family are important when we need to remember who we are. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jd9zYKLepCw>)

CHECKING IN

Begin this time with an opening ritual, a moment of silence, a short prayer the group says together, or a candle lit to symbolize Christ’s presence. Take a moment to claim this space and time as holy. Allow a moment of silence to linger.

Then invite the group to think about the issue of identity theft.

**Do you know anyone who has had his or her identity stolen?
What was that experience like for them?**

At this point, you may choose to show the CitiBank identity theft commercial. Then ask these questions, encouraging group members to listen prayerfully to one another without comment:

When have you felt as if your identity had been stolen? (For instance: Have you felt that someone was pushing you to do something you knew was not you? Have you been introduced as someone’s little sister or brother? Have you been ignored or dismissed by another person?)

When has someone seemed to recognize and honor you for who you truly are?

EXPLORING THE WORD

Scripture: Psalm 139:1–14

The words of Psalm 139:1–14 seem like the antitheses of our culture’s view, in which we are valued for what we do and how well we do it.

Invite members of the group to take turns reading aloud the psalm, with each person reading one verse. Then encourage them to read it to themselves a second time. Ask them, as they read, to identify words, phrases, or images that they are drawn to and also to notice how they feel as they reflect on the words they have chosen. When everyone is ready, invite people to name the words they chose.

Ask the following question. As people identify words, labels, or roles, write their responses on a sheet of newsprint on which you have written “‘Fearfully and wonderfully made’ vs . . .”

What words, labels, or roles are you asked to assume that erode your sense of being “fearfully and wonderfully made”? (These may be labels or roles group members place on themselves.)

Ask people to form three groups. Give each group an index card or sheet of paper on which you have written one of the following instructions for discussion:

1. **“I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”** (Psalm 139:14)

Discuss:

- What does Psalm 139:14 say about your core identity?
- If you truly believed that you are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” how would it change the way you see yourself? How would it change the way you treat others?

2. **I Belong.**

Discuss:

- Who are the people (groups or individuals) in your life who help you remember your core identity as God’s beloved?
- Who loves you no matter what? Who has your back? Why is having them in your life important?

3. **I am Becoming.**

While nothing can take away our identity as God’s beloved, we may forget who we are.

Respond to this saying: Practice makes perfect, so be careful what you practice.

- What self-defeating thoughts and activities do you practice that make you forget that you are “fearfully and wonderfully made”?
- What thoughts and activities do you practice that will help you to believe in the wonderful and blessed person you are becoming as you move into the future.

After sufficient time for discussion, bring the groups together to talk about their observations.

SHARING IN PRAYER

Invite group members to read this prayer twice, first silently and then aloud in unison:

“God, we are planting seeds that will sprout in the future. The thoughts we think, the beliefs we have about ourselves and others, the feelings we harbor in our hearts are seeds that will take root and bear fruit for good or ill. Help us, God, to sow seeds of kindness, forgiveness, and hope. Help us to nurture thoughts and actions that will help us flourish and become the people you “fearfully and wonderfully made.” In Jesus’s name, we pray. Amen.”

TAKING IT FURTHER

Point out the quote by Grady Nutt: “I am a person of worth, created in the image of God to relate and to live.” Invite each member of the group to come up with statements that reflect his or her sense of identity as God’s beloved, a person who is “fearfully and wonderfully made.” You may also decide to make this a group project, inviting people to write statements about the group.

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