

“AND EVERYTHING TO DO WITH WHO’S LOOKING”

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

I John 4:16b-21; Psalm 20

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June 17, 2018

Recently I happily happened upon a *New York Times* bestseller novel by Jodi Picoult entitled Small Great Things. It’s a story about Ruth Jefferson, an African-American labor and delivery nurse, who is accused by a white supremacist couple of murdering their baby during a medical emergency after they had ordered the hospital to remove her from the care of their newborn because of the color of her skin. It’s a gripping, powerful, page-turning expose of racism, white privilege, and inequality in contemporary America. Ultimately, it is about our common humanity.

At the beginning of the story, though, we are made privy to a slice of Ruth’s professional life meant to establish with the readers her nursing bona fides. We are to know that Ruth is arguably the finest L & D nurse on the Mercy-West Haven Hospital staff and that she is as good a person as she is a nurse. It’s a little unusual for a sermon, but I want to read to you a little section from the beginning of the book because I find in something Ruth says one of the truest descriptions of the love of God I’ve ever read outside of the pages of scripture.

A couple is in the delivery room - not the white supremacist couple but a typical couple who had come to the hospital to deliver their baby. Their baby, though, turned out to be anything but typical. Ruth explains:

“From the neck down, he was perfect: ten fingers, ten toes, chubby belly. But where his ear should have been, there was a twist of lips and a single tooth. Instead of a face there was a swirling eddy of skin with no features.”

“His mother - my patient - had received prenatal care including an ultrasound, but the baby had been positioned in a way so that the facial deformity hadn’t been visible. The spine, the heart, the organs all had looked fine, so no one was expecting what happened...”

“Is he all right?” the mother asked, panicking. “Why isn’t he crying?”

“I had a student nurse shadowing me, and she screamed.”

“Get out,’ I said tightly, shoving her from the room. Then I took the newborn from the obstetrician and placed him on the warmer, wiping the vernix from his limbs. The OB did a quick exam, silently met my gaze, and turned back to the parents, who by now knew something was terribly wrong. In soft words, the doctor said their child had profound birth defects that were incompatible with life.”

“But this infant, alive, for however long that might be, was still this couple’s son. So I cleaned him and swaddled him, the way I would any other newborn, while the conversation behind me between the parents and the doctor stopped and started like a car choking through the winter. *Why? How? What if you...? How long until...?* Questions no one ever wants to ask, and no one ever wants to answer.”

“The mother still was crying when I settled the baby in the crook of her elbow...She smiled down at him, her heart in her eyes. ‘Ian,’ she whispered. ‘Ian Michael Barnes.’”

“She wore an expression I’ve only seen in paintings in museums, of a love and a grief so fierce that they forged together to create some new, raw emotion.”

“I turned to the father. ‘Would you like to hold your son?’”

“He looked like he was about to be sick. ‘I can’t,’ he muttered and bolted from the room.”

“I followed him, but I was intercepted by the nurse in training, who was apologetic and upset. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. It’s just...it was a *monster*.”

“It *is* a *baby*,” I corrected, and I pushed past her.

I cornered the father in the parents’ lounge. ‘Your wife and your son need you.’”

“That’s not my son,” he said. ‘That...thing...’”

“Is not going to be on this earth for very long. Which means you’d better give him all the love you had stored up for his lifetime right now.’ I waited until he looked me in the eye, and then I turned on my heel. I did not have to glance back to know he was following me.”

“When we entered the hospital room, his wife still was nuzzling the infant, her lips pressed to the smooth canvas of his brow. I took the tiny bundle from her arms and handed the baby to her husband. He sucked in his breath and then drew back the blanket from the spot where the baby’s face should have been.”

“When the father started to cry, the sobs shook his body, like a hurricane bends a tree.”...

“They took turns holding their son for ten hours. That mother, she even tried to let him nurse. I could not stop staring - not because it was ugly or wrong, but because it was the most remarkable thing I’d ever seen.”

“I brought that stupid nursing student back into the room with me, ostensibly to check the mother’s vitals, but really to make her see with her own eyes how *love has nothing to do with what you’re looking at, and everything to do with who’s looking.*”

“It goes to show you: every baby is born beautiful.”

“It’s what we project on them that makes them ugly.”¹

* * * * *

It’s not only other people on whom we project ugliness because of race, class, creed, and a hundred other differences. We also project it on ourselves. “I’m too fat.” “I don’t measure up.” “I’m not good enough.” “I don’t fit in.” “I’m a fraud, an impostor.” I’ve said all of those things and I hazard a guess you’ve said some of them or similar things, too.

But Ruth helps me to experience viscerally the gracious reality that when God looks at me God does not see as I do. God does not find me wanting as I do in so many ways but sees only beauty, worthiness, and value because *love has nothing to do with who’s being looked at and everything to do with who’s looking.* In the words of John we heard earlier, the God who looks at us is the *God (who) is love,*² and that makes all the difference. God sees me, you, us, through the eyes of God’s own pure love. If we believe it, it is enough to change our lives.

¹ Picoult, Jodi, Small Great Things. New York: Ballantine Books, 2016, p.9-11.

² 1 John 4:16b

We don't have to strive and strain for God's love and acceptance. They are freely given because the essence and nature of God is love. God's love and acceptance are bestowed on us, not achieved. They are not the result of negotiation, transaction, or deal. They are irrevocable and our baptisms, like Stephen's today, are sure and certain signs that God's love and acceptance come to us before we even can think of earning them. We can't earn them because come only as gifts, pure and simple. Our role is to receive them and to trust the God who gives them and live in the confidence of them. And here's the thing: if it's true for us, it's true for all human beings. We all are children of God...people of every color and circumstance.

There are two measures that tell whether or not we truly have received and believe the love of God for us. The first is gratitude. If we have received and trust God's unfailing love, we will live enormously grateful lives. Not entitled. Not arrogant or boastful, but thankful. Gratitude is what enables us to breathe and to relax into beauty, generosity, and joy. Across the years as I have taken youth on mission trips to places where people are financially poor, the youth almost always have exclaimed with amazement about how happy the people seem. It is because they trust the love of God rather than the things affluence can buy. Even in their poverty, gratitude gives dignity and an openness to God.

The other measure of whether it is God's love that shapes our lives is, indeed, how we treat other people. John is adamant about it: *"Those who say, 'I love God,' but hate their sisters and brothers, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."*³

"Every person is born beautiful." Every person, Ruth said in that delivery room and Christ in his gospel. *"It's what we project on them that makes them ugly in our eyes."*

It's so easy to judge other people, to make assumptions, to think the worst, to project our prejudices. When God looks at us, we are not maligned or condemned. We are not segregated, separated, deemed illegal, ripped from our mother's arms, or turned away. We are not profiled or prosecuted because of our race or religion. Because God is doing the looking, we are seen through the lens of love and claimed as the beloveds of God. All of us.

So, the Attorney General of our country can bend the scripture to suit his purposes and justify his actions all he wants. He can project his fear-induced politics and polemics on the poor, the downtrodden, the refugees, and the immigrants. He can cast his aspersions and try to convince us they are ugly and dangerous. But hard as he tries to diminish and disparage the humanity of others, it does not change the truth that all his words and actions say more about the looker

³ 1 John 4:20

than the looked-upon. It works the same for us. How we see says more about the one doing the looking than who or what is being looked at. Incredibly, God's love will not give up even on Jeff Sessions just as God does not by the mercy of her love give up on any of us so always we have the chance to mend the way we look and see.

If, then, we live in the light of God's love and we allow to grow within us the heart and hospitality of God, if we receive and trust God's grace and love, then we shall love and not hate, love and not hurt, love and not harm our sisters and brothers and our neighbors, whoever they are. The arc of the moral universe will bend more sharply toward justice and the Beloved Community will come closer.

Love has nothing to do with who or what we're looking at and everything to do with who's looking. It's true about God. It's true about us.

"Every baby is born beautiful," Ruth says in Jodi Picoult's book. "It's what we project on them that makes them ugly." What if, filled with God's love, we just stop doing that, we stop projecting ugliness, all of us, and begin to see as God sees?

Amen.