

**BORDERLANDS:** *the district near a border, an intermediate state or region*  
*the space between two boundaries; an intermediate district*

## THE WOMB, THE TOMB & THE GROOM

Series: Borderlands

Date: February 25, 2018

Scripture: Psalm 139

Key sermon points:

- Imago Dei, Image of God
- Personhood begins at conception
- The days you will live match the purpose you were given
- Eternal beings carry intrinsic value
- The scars of yesterday can hold up the miracles of tomorrow

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## BORDERLANDS

I think of the movie from back in 2004, *The Terminal*, with Tom Hanks. It's about this guy, Viktor Navorski, from Croatia. In the movie, Navorski, who is played by Tom Hanks, arrives at JFK airport and is trying to get back to his home country, but his home country has recently gone through a civil war. So they won't permit him to enter his homeland, but they also won't allow him to step into the United States. He's stuck in the red tape of the bureaucracy of the day, unable to leave the terminal. He is right in between two forces. And if you're paying attention to the culture around us and to the people around you, you will find that our world is stuck in a borderland.

In our culture there are so many different boundaries or borders that have become increasingly unclear during the last few decades. Think of the last couple of weeks, and the tragic school shooting in Florida. When something like this happens, there are a bunch of people that come out and say, "We need to ban all guns." And then there are bunches of people that come out and say, "No, we need to arm ourselves with more guns." So which one is it? Is it more guns or is it less guns?

Or what about a young lady who identifies as a male. Does she use the ladies room or does she use the mens' room or do we come up with some other room for her to use the bathroom? These are real issues of society. One person says, "Black Lives Matter." Another person responds with, "Blue Lives Matter." Another person responds and says, "All Lives Matter." So which one is it? And maybe we've lost the point in the midst of all these conversations.

City Church comes together under a specific conviction, a conviction that *there is a wisdom that transcends my opinion. There is a wisdom that transcends my experience.* There is a knowledge that we can obtain, a light that we can see, that goes beyond your or my understanding of a situation. So we seek to humble ourselves and ask God to reveal to us a wisdom beyond ourselves.

We are going to start today with the topic of where we all began, the topic of human life.

- What is human life at its core?
- When did it begin?
- When did it end?
- What is its value?

## IMAGO DEI

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you. (Psalm 139:13–18)

I was two and a half years old. It's the earliest memory I have. In fact it's the only memory I have from that young age. I can remember it clearly. My mom brought me to see my Grandmother who was dying of cancer. I can vividly remember walking into my grandmother's room and seeing her there. She had oxygen tubes in her nose. She had a cap on her head. I remember thinking to myself, "Is Grandma going swimming? Why does she have this cap on her head?" All of her hair had fallen out. She had lost most of her weight. She looked skeletal. And I can remember, as a small kid, walking into that room and knowing in my heart that something wasn't right, knowing that her life was slipping away and that something about that was very wrong.

September 3, 2015. My Aunt Mary died. She was 52 years old. I arrived at the hospital about five minutes after she passed away. When I got there I sat by her bed and took her hand. It was still warm. I looked at her face and began to weep. There's a sadness that comes whenever you lose someone, but it was more than sadness. There was also this gravity, this sense of awareness that her life had slipped away. And that life was sacred.

Every one of us has a different story in this area. You've been by the bedside of someone passing away or you've lost a loved one. In those moments, you're not just grieving; you're not just sad. Something inside you innately knows that this thing called life is sacred.

The question I want to explore is: *How do we know this?*

How do we know that this life we live is so sacred? What foundational truth supports the conviction that life is valuable? Philosophers have been wrestling with this for a long time. Throughout history, people have discussed the issue of life and why it's valuable. Why should we value human life specifically? The pervading perspective among many top educators and philosophers of our day is what they would call *capacity*. Human beings have evolved to have certain capacities that put them beyond other species. For example, the capacity to reason, the capacity for moral choices, the capacity for self-consciousness, the capacity to do all of these things makes us different from the animal world, different from nature. It establishes a certain level of value for the species known as humanity. Many educators and philosophers of our day

would say human beings have evolved to an extent that they have greater capacity, and because of that greater capacity, we should value human life more.

The problem with that way of thinking is, *what happens when a human being doesn't have those capacities? Or what happens when a human being loses those capacities?* When an elderly man loses his ability to reason? Or a child is born with autism or cerebral palsy or some other issue that they have to face? When they lack those certain capacities, why should we value them to the same degree as an individual who has those capacities? What reasoning do we have for clinging to their life as intrinsically valuable? The answer that society offers is an awkward silence.

In 1973, it was this argument of capacity led the Supreme Court, in *Roe vs. Wade*, to decide that, in the United States, a woman has the right to terminate a pregnancy. Fundamentally, they decided that an unborn child cannot reason, cannot make moral choices, and is not self-conscious. They do not have capacity therefore they do not have the rights of personhood.

But if we are honest, all of us, no matter where we fall on these issues, can see that this reasoning is a bit faulty. If that's the way we think about the value of human life, then what protects the rights of a child who is two months old? That child doesn't have reasoning capacity yet; that child doesn't have the ability to make moral choices yet. So what protects their life? Or what protects an older person with Alzheimer's who is losing those capacities?

It was actually this issue of life that really set Christians apart in the first century as the church began to grow rapidly. It was a time when, like our day, human life was viewed based upon capacity. It was not uncommon for a Greek or Roman to have a baby, oftentimes a girl, and not desiring that child, leave them out in the sun to die. This was an accepted practice in that culture. It was the Christians that came and found these babies dying alone and took them in and began to raise them. People said, "Why would they do that?" But they didn't just do that. They turned around and loved and served and accepted the moms and dads who had left their child out to die.

This early church baffled society because they were loving the unloved children and, at the same time, caring for the very parents that had abandoned them. People stood back and said, *what is it about these people that makes them so fundamentally different?* What made them so different was that they did not value humans based upon capacity. They valued humans based upon what they called *IMAGO DEI, the image of God*.

Look how David describes it in *Psalms 139*:

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

Whose "you" in the passage? The "you" is God. David's conviction was that, "God formed me." In the inner secret dwelling of my mother's womb, God formed me.

It's amazing how intricately God has formed you. You have a hundred million receptor cells in just one of your eyes. You have 625 sweat glands in every square inch of your skin. You have two million pages of information in just one of your chromosomes. But that's not all. He put inside of you a soul that has imagination, and art, and reason, and mathematics, and architecture, and language, and the ability to love. God designed you different than every other creature on planet

earth. When he took out the blue print to form humanity, the blue print that he used was himself.

So God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

In the image of God. This is a radically different foundation than capacity. If capacity says, "You are valuable because you can do these certain things or because you have these certain abilities," the believer says, "No, you are valuable because you are created in the Image of God as a member of the human race. This is where your intrinsic value comes from."

In verse 14, David says:

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. (Psalm 139:14)

In the original Hebrew, *wonderful* is a word that is later used to describe God himself; one of his names is wonderful. "Wonderful are your works," David says. Then the phrase, "*my soul knows it very well.*" I believe that's true, that there is something inside of all of us that knows it well. The last time you saw a baby born, the last time you stood at a funeral and watched a friend move into the next life, in all of those moments, your soul knows it. Your soul knows that we are not cattle. Your soul knows that birth and death are not just biological shifts, that there is something more going on there. There is life. There is the Image of God, and it matters.

## PERSONHOOD BEGINS AT CONCEPTION

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; (Psalm 139:15–16a)

I love the poetic imagery David uses here, *the depths of the earth*. He's speaking of the darkness of a woman's womb. Inside a woman's womb, this amazing mystery occurs when God weaves together the human being. But then David says, "Your eyes saw **my** unformed substance." That's an important phrase in the text. He doesn't say, "Your eyes saw **an** unformed substance." He says, "Your eyes saw **my** unformed substance." In other words, I wasn't just a mass of tissue. I wasn't just an unformed substance inside my mother's womb. I was a person. I was me. What he was trying to tell us here is that personhood is not attached to how formed I am. This is an idea that goes all the way through the scripture from beginning to end.

The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:4-5)

God is saying that he has known you before those molecules all came together, before everything started to click and you began running around, talking, eating ice cream and everything else. Before all of that, He knew you.

In Galatians, Paul says:

But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace...

(Galatians 1:15 NIV)

Interestingly enough, it's not just scripture that tells us that life begins at this early stage. Science now that tells us the same thing. The American College of Pediatrics says it like this:

The predominance of human biological research confirms that human life begins at conception or fertilization. At fertilization, the human being emerges as a whole genetically distinct living organism.

The moment a sperm and an egg meet, 46 unique chromosomes come together and those 46 chromosomes are the foundation of everything you are physically to this day, a whole human being. Within eight weeks, that human being has a fingerprint, a unique blood type, all of its organs, a functioning brain, and a heart that is beating. From what we see in all of this — from both science and from scripture — a certain conviction begins to grow: that you're formed by God, that you're made in God's image and that personhood begins at conception.

This obviously has massive implications. It has massive implications personally, massive implications socially. It has massive implications politically and morally. What does this mean in a nation where more than 50 million children have been aborted? How do we process this? How are we supposed to think about this? I'm not saying choose Democratic or Republican or some particular party. That's not where I'm going with this. I'm asking how do we, as followers of Jesus, process this outside of any political system? As followers of Jesus first, what do we do with this?

I remember recently reading the story of Dr. Bernard Nathanson. He was an outspoken doctor in favor of a woman's right to choose in the 1960s and 70s. By the early 70s, he had performed or presided over 60,000 abortions. He actually performed an abortion on his own girlfriend, the abortion to end his own baby's life. It wasn't until the early 1970s, with the invention of the ultrasound, that something changed for Dr. Nathanson. For the first time, he was given the opportunity to see a baby in the womb. One biographer records his first experience with the ultrasound:

The technician applied a conductive gel to the woman's abdomen and then began working a handheld sensor over her stomach. As the splatter of the video screen clarified, Nathanson was amazed. He could see a throbbing heart. When the technician focused closely on the image, Nathanson could see all four chambers pumping. It looked like an animated blossom with such thickness and definition that it took his breath away. He could see all the major vessels leading to and from the cardiac rose.

The technician next brought the baby's forehead, eyes, and mouth into focus. Then, by zooming out, the technician showed that the baby had its hands folded over its face. Right hand. Left hand. On each one, Nathanson counted four fingers and a thumb.

The view from above the crown of the baby's head showed the development of the brain, where the first folds could be seen. Then the technician scanned the elegant architecture of the spine.

Was it a boy or girl? Just like expectant parents, the group couldn't help wondering. It

was a girl. Then finally, the technician showed the bone structure of the legs, and each foot with five perfect toes.

During the course of the scan, Nathanson noticed that his mind had dropped the word fetus in favor of baby. Suddenly, everything he had been learning about the child in the womb since his entry into the field of perinatology snapped into focus. For example, he knew that a fertilized human egg becomes a self-directed entity very early, after it has multiplied into only four cells; that the heartbeat begins as early as the eighteenth day after conception; that at six weeks the major organ systems have formed. In fact, after only twelve weeks, no new anatomical development occurs; the child simply grows larger and more capable of sustaining life outside of the womb.

All these had been only medical facts, but now they coalesced with the grainy image on the screen and crashed into Nathanson's consciousness. He felt a chill along his spine, and the air in the room seemed to grow denser, making it hard for him to breathe. His mood swung from the exultation of new knowledge to a brow-sweating panic as the question hit him: How many babies just like this little girl had he himself cut to pieces? How many human lives had he taken? (How Now Shall We Live? Charles Colson)

This is where things get serious. There's been a debate for more than forty years about when human life begins, and implantation and fertilization and all these questions. But as we reflect on what the scripture seems to say pretty clearly — that God knew our unformed substance, that our personhood is not based on how formed we are in the womb — and even what science is telling us, we must wonder, Is it wisdom for you and I, if we really do believe that God has a knowledge above our own, to mince words about the image of God? Should we be making these close calls and trying to justify certain things?

Many of us might fall into the category where we say, "I would never have an abortion myself. I don't participate in that behavior, but I definitely support the rights of others to do it." That seems like a pretty measured and calculated response, especially here in New England. At the surface level, it seems like a justifiable way to think about things. But when you step back and look at the scope of history, you realize that that argument has gotten humanity into a lot of trouble over the years. In fact, it was the same argument that many white people used before the Civil War broke out, when slavery was still legal. They would say, "Honestly, I don't believe in slavery, but I do support the others' right to have slaves, so I am not going to get in the middle of it." And it's the same argument that the Germans used in the 1930s when they said, "I know it's not right to throw a bunch of Jews into a work camp, but I'm going to support the government's right to make those decisions. It's not my job to get in the middle of that. It's not my job to flaunt my opinion."

Is it possible that our sense of reason is beginning to border on madness? I recently learned that you could spend up to a year in prison if you tamper with the egg of a bald eagle, but 125,000 babies are being legally aborted across our planet every single day.

Something is off here. Something is a little strange in the way that we think. How is it that we can reconcile a conviction that scripture is true and, at the same time, a support for abortion.

But there are two sides to this. Unfortunately and tragically, it's the same people that say they love the baby, that hate the mom. And that's not God's heart. If we really believe in Imago Dei, in the Image of God, it should drive us to do anything and everything we can to honorably protect every human being, and at the same time it should drive us to love and forgive and receive the parents that have chosen abortion.

Maybe there are some of you who disagree with almost everything I have said. Maybe your mind is racing and you're justifying and coming up with your own thoughts or feelings about this. Or maybe, if you really do some soul searching, you are the boyfriend that pressured your girlfriend to go and deal with this situation and move on with life. Or maybe you're the parent that spoke to your daughter, found out what was going on, and just decided to look the other way and not really deal with the issue. Or maybe you are the young lady who was 19 with her whole life ahead of her, just going into college, and decided this can't change my direction. It's so much easier to have a 10-minute procedure and move on.

One in four women in the United States will have an abortion in her lifetime. Most of us are impacted at some level by this reality. Maybe as you hear these words, a cold chill goes down your spine, discomfort stirs in your heart, and a cloud of guilt starts to swarm over you. You might not even realize how much this has impacted you. You never connected your depression to what happened five years ago. You never connected the anxiety, the suicidal thoughts, the fear to the guilt and the shame that's been chasing you for years because of something that happened to you in your past. What you need to see is that the God of scripture is not standing back with his arms closed rejecting you. His arms are wide open and he's crying out to you. He's saying, "I love you. I want to receive you. I want to restore you. I want to heal you. And I am the only one who can remove that burden of guilt from your soul and give you peace again. I am here to give you life."

That's his plan. That's his purpose for you. You don't have to stand out in the distance feeling ashamed and guilty. You need to come into the light and be healed, loved and restored by a Father who knows your story and isn't ashamed to call you His child.

## **THE DAYS YOU WILL LIVE MATCH THE PURPOSE YOU WERE GIVEN**

Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:16)

There's more. The issue of life and the belief of the value of human life goes far beyond just its beginning. It embodies every aspect of human life. In the text we see that David believes that God knows every part of his life. He believes that God has planned every aspect of his life. I'm sure you've heard in the news and on social media that Billy Graham passed away. He was one of the great voices for Christ in our generation, maybe the greatest evangelist of all time. He died at 99 years old. He spent the last decade of his life battling cancer and Parkinson's and many other illnesses. Some might say, "Why did God let him suffer like that? Why did he linger so long?" Wouldn't it have made more sense for him to just end his own life, assisted suicide, just move on to the next life and avoid suffering? Ecclesiastes Chapter 7 gives us some insight into this:

Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? (Ecclesiastes 7:17 NASB)

This is a very important idea about life, the idea *that you don't get to choose your time, God does*. That God has marked out your days, just as David said, and there is a specific number that He has given you. Or you could say it like this, *the days you will live match the purpose you were given*.

That's a huge idea. You don't have to worry about dying! Trust in Christ and the days you will live will match the purpose you were given. Maybe you feel like you are past your time; your loved ones have left; you don't feel like you are here for any purpose. That's a lie! If you are still alive, God has a purpose for you. If your heart is still beating, he still wants you here and he has a unique and specific assignment. Your job is not over until your life expires. God gave Billy Graham 99 years to go after the one, and Billy was faithful to do it. And God calls you to be faithful too.

## ETERNAL BEINGS CARRY INTRINSIC VALUE

How do we treat those that have less capacity, those that are intellectually impaired? How do we treat those who are elderly? One study recently found that elderly Americans are robbed of 36.5 billion dollars each year. Ninety percent of elderly abuse occurs from a family member. What that means is that there are those of us hearing this that, you've been taking some out of Grandma's check; you've been removing some from Grandpa's savings, from your father's retirement. You're doing it because it makes your life a little more comfortable and he can't seem to think through it anyway. Maybe it is not best for him, but it is certainly best for you. You think, "It's not a big deal. It's not that big of an issue. I'm just going to do it because it benefits me and he doesn't even need to know." What you need to realize is that, when you take advantage of someone who has less capacity, what you are doing is desecrating the image of God. You are violating a covenant between you and God. You are dishonoring the very image of God.

God has a purpose for every day. He has a purpose for your days. Look how he wraps it up:

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you. (Psalm 139:17–18)

"I awake and I am still with you." What does he mean? Certainly he is talking about every morning when he wakes up. "I awake and I am still with you." But the text infers something else here too, more than physical sleep. The writer is inferring that he is not just confident that when he wakes up, he'll see God, he is confident that when he dies, he'll see God.

This is really the essence of the entire text and the reason we are gathering today: you are not just skin and bones. This is the deep conviction of the follower of Christ. You are not just flesh and blood. There's something more to you. You are a soul. You are a human being that is eternal in your essence. This is what causes David to stand back and wonder. This is what causes him to say, "This is amazing. This is profound. This is awe-inspiring." It is the conviction that human beings carry intrinsic value: that child with Down syndrome, that young boy with cerebral palsy,



that elderly person who has lost their ability to see and hear, that baby in a mother's womb. Eternal beings carry intrinsic value. This is the deep conviction that we must build our lives upon. In fact it is the only conviction that makes sense when this *capacities* argument falls apart. Eternal beings carry an intrinsic value, a value that goes beyond *what you can do for us*, a value that comes from the *Image of God*.

You might be at a place where you say, "How valuable is a human being? If a person has very little capacity, how valuable are they?" Some would say that even a sermon like this causes more questions than answers. It is important that we wrestle with these questions because it is these questions that propel us to a different way of living. How should I honor a human life in this situation? How should I honor the Image of God in this scenario? What do I do with it? How valuable is a human being really? The only place we can get an answer is, not from ourselves, but from God. If you want to know how valuable a human being is, you only have to look to one place. You only have to look to the cross of Jesus Christ.

We said we were going to talk about the womb, the tomb and the groom. When Jesus came to this earth, he came as a groom in pursuit of His bride. He came as the creator God in love with the creation He made in His image. And He came to rescue us from the brokenness of our own souls and spirits. When He came, He lived a perfect life, the life that you and I never could live. He died a substitutionary death. One man from Nazareth hung on a cross outside Jerusalem and died for the sins of the world. He shed His blood, and when that blood touched the soil of the earth, it washed away the sin that lives in your heart 2000 years later. Because of the sacrifice of His cross, He cleansed you of all guilt and sin from the beginning of your life to the end. Then He rose from the dead to tell you that the check had cleared, that the debt was paid, that you were forgiven forever so that by faith in His name alone you could receive a complete cleansing of all your guilt, and all your shame and all your sorrow, so that you could be accepted and blameless before God. That's how valuable you are.

Maybe something I said speaks to the weight that you carry. There's only one place where that weight can be removed from your shoulders. There's only one place you can find relief from the guilt and the shame of yesterday. And that place is the cross. That's where He wants you to go. That's where He wants you to find real healing.

## **THE SCARS OF YESTERDAY CAN HOLD UP THE MIRACLE OF TOMORROW**

For me this topic of human life is a very personal topic. It has personal implication in my life. 1980. My older brother was born to my Mom and Dad. Then, six weeks after my Mom had my brother, the doctor's discovered that she had cervical cancer. They told her that they would need to remove her cervix and part of the lining of her uterus. They told her that she would never be able to have babies again, and that, if by some miracle, she got pregnant again, she wouldn't be able to carry a baby because the ability to form a mucus plug had been removed from her body. She could no longer hold a baby in her womb even if she were miraculously able to get pregnant. Two and a half years later, Mom gets pregnant with me. It turns out that the scar tissue that formed from her previous surgery was enough to hold me in place for those nine months in her womb.

God has a word for you through that. As my Mom and I recently talked about this story, I heard the Holy Spirit speak to my spirit for you today. I heard the Lord say, so simply, *that the scars from your last season are going to hold in place the miracle for your next season.*

Four months into my Mom's pregnancy with me, she found out she had uterine cancer. At that time there were twice as many abortions happening in the United States as today. My mom's doctors said, clearly that is the appropriate response, "You need to abort this child or the cancer may spread or grow." My parents decided not to have an abortion, but instead to fight for my life, risking their own lives and fighting for my life. Fighting so that now, 35 years later, I could stand up here and say to you: LIFE IS VALUABLE. Eternal beings carry intrinsic value. God has a purpose for you. Live your life like it is sacred. Treat others like their life is sacred. Don't judge a man on his capacity, judge him on the image of God and value him, and value her, because they reflect God's image, and His glory and His beauty.

That's what makes us unique. That's what makes people stand back and say, "Why do these people love like that? How is it that they can love the unborn child and love the one who aborted the unborn child? How is it that they can have that kind of love?" And the only answer is the Image of God and the cross of Christ.

Statistics tell us that one out of every four women has had an abortion. That means that there are dozens and dozens of men here that have either looked the other way or encouraged the procedure. There are parents, there are sisters, there are brothers, there are best friends that have done the same. I don't know your story. Maybe there is someone with a handicap that lives next door that you avoid every day. Maybe there's an elderly family member that you never take time for or you take a little from. I don't know where God is speaking to your heart today, but I do want you to come to Jesus. And maybe that's the last thing you want to do. Maybe you want to run away. Friend, running away is not going to get you anywhere. Run to Him. Let Him heal you. Let Him forgive you. Let Him restore you. There is a God who can take the scars of yesterday and use them to hold up the miracle of tomorrow. And He's here to meet you now.

To all who mourn, He will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning and festive praise instead of despair.