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If you're watching this worship service with someone else, turn to someone near you and say, "You're beautiful." If you're alone, tell yourself, "You're beautiful."

I know; it feels awkward, but try it. I'll wait...

How did it feel when someone told you that you're beautiful? Have you ever thought of yourself as beautiful?

Advertisers try to tell us what beauty looks like, which often doesn't match our realities, so they suggest their products will make us look like they want us to look. But is that really what beauty is?

One little girl wondered about beauty as she was watching her mother apply some facial cream when she asked her mother what that stuff was that she was putting on her face.

Her mother answered, "This is facial cream, honey. The woman at the store told me it would make me beautiful."

The girl looked carefully at her mother's face and said, "Mommy, I think that lady at the store lied to you."<sup>1</sup>

Why did the girl make such a comment? Some may wonder if she had some image in her mind that

did not match her mom. Or could it be that she thought her mom was already beautiful and didn't need someone to sell her face cream?

When thinking of beauty, many of us may feel reluctant to consider ourselves as beautiful, for we often have mixed feelings about our bodies. We hesitate to even discuss our bodies with one another, as one person expressed to me when looking over the scriptures for this six-week series on "Beguiled by Beauty." When looking at this week's scripture from the Song of Songs, also sometimes called the Song of Solomon, she commented, "You're not planning on using that scripture in worship, are you? I think you may need to find something else rather than that one."

If you have stumbled upon this portion of the Bible before, you may have been surprised to find this love poem describing a passionate encounter between two lovers. This writing is filled with intimate descriptions of bodies, and although it's sensual, it never reaches the X-rated nature of the images that fill many contemporary movie screens.

2

Years ago, I read a passage from the Song of Songs during a youth group meeting, and the teens were shocked that such words and imagery were used in the Bible, and yet, I think they were delighted to know the Bible contained real-life connections to what they were beginning to notice about their own bodies. I imagine many of them went home that evening and read the rest of that book of the Bible.

Readers throughout history who felt uncomfortable with the sensual nature of this book offered different interpretations, such as rabbis who suggested that the book is a metaphor about the relationship between God and Israel. Later Christians suggested the book described the relationship between Christ and the church.

Why are we so uncomfortable to read this as a love poem, to celebrate our body-ness? We're often reluctant to discuss this topic in relation to ourselves, and some in the church grow extremely uncomfortable when thinking about relationships between those who are gay or lesbian. Some church folks may even become rude to those who are

transgender, those who express their gender differently than the gender assigned at birth.

I often hear people use the Bible to validate their views of sexuality by quoting a few passages here and there, which is not much different than those who used the Bible to justify slavery by quoting certain scriptures. When we misuse the Bible to exclude certain groups of people, we have turned the Bible into a weapon rather than the message of grace that God intended.

We each experience our bodies in different ways, and unfortunately, we often judge others by the appearance of their bodies, as preacher Fred Craddock confessed after visiting a church and seeing the minister for the first time.

I was absolutely shocked. He was very tall—I forgave him for that. I suppose he was 6'4". He was also very large, maybe 280 or 300 pounds. But the most noticeable feature was his stumbling, lumbering gait. He was awkward, almost falling, with his long useless arms at his sides, like they were awaiting further instruction. His head was misshapen, his hair was askew. He stumbled up the three or four steps to get to the pulpit. When he turned to face us, I saw the thick

glasses... When he read, he held the book near his nose. When he spoke, the sinews of his neck worked with such vigor as he pushed out the words, it was as if he had learned to speak as an adult.

Fred noted that the preaching was so-so quality, but he could sense that the preacher and the congregation genuinely loved one another. He wondered how such an odd-looking preacher could captivate his listeners. And then Fred explained:

I started remembering things that I shouldn't have remembered—all those stories about how people who have grotesque features sometimes are granted a special quality of affection, *Beauty and the Beast* or Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, so ugly and yet so beautiful in his love and capacity for affection...

I wanted to get acquainted with this extraordinary preacher, so I lingered at the door... One woman I would guess to be seventy shook his hand at the door. She spoke with him

and said this: "I wish I could know your mother" ... He said, "My mother's name is Grace."

When everybody had left and I began to visit with him, we sat on the back pew for a few minutes, and I said, "That was an unusual response you gave to that woman, 'My mother's name is Grace.'"

And he said, "It is? When I was born...I was put up for adoption at the Department of Family Services. But as you can see, nobody wanted to adopt me. So, I went from foster home to foster home, and when I was about sixteen or seventeen, I saw some young people going into a church. I wanted to be with young people, so I went in, and there I met grace—the grace of God."<sup>2</sup>

It's through the grace of God that we are all part of God's family—each of us a beautiful part of the body of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgkin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for*

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*Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #77.

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock; Mike Graves; Richard F. Ward. *Craddock Stories*. Kindle Edition.