

Welcome

→ Introduce Brenda

Brenda will read **Psalm 139**. It should be on the screens. (see below)

Teaching One

You've no doubt heard the story of the anthropologists who visited a primitive tribe and took pictures of them. The tribe freaked out, worried that the pictures were 'stealing their souls'.

This is a story that, at least when I was growing up, was widely circulated with a kind of awe - can you imagine how strange it would be to see a camera for the first time? And there was also a little bit of pride in there - look at those primitive tribes without technology.

Which is why I was fascinated to read the real story in Melissa Dahl's book *Cringeworthy*. Dahl identifies the anthropologist as Edmund Carpenter and the photographer as Adelaide de Menil, who went to New Guinea to study the Biame tribe.

What drew Carpenter there in 1969 was that he was nearly certain none of the Biame had ever really seen their own reflection. They had only shards of mirrors and otherwise only running river water, which obviously don't offer a clear reflection.

It's true that Carpenter and Menil brought polaroids and cameras. They also brought tape recorders. And it's true that the Biame people freaked out when they first saw pictures of themselves and heard their own voices played back to them. They covered their mouths and ducked their heads.

But, according to Carpenter, they didn't freak out because they thought the cameras and tape recorders were magic, or because they were somehow losing their souls. Rather, according to Carpenter,

[**Mirror Image**] read from p 21

This trauma doesn't last long. Carpenter reported that within a matter of days they were grooming themselves in front of mirrors, taking pictures of each other, wearing out the batteries on the tape recorders.

[**Mouth**] Carpenter reflected on how swiftly they moved from terror to pleasure, on why the Biame initially covered their mouths and ducked their heads away from their images. "I think they do so to prevent loss of identity. New Guineans call it loss of soul, but it's the same phenomenon. It's their response to any sudden embarrassment, any sudden self-consciousness."

We don't like the fact that how we exist in our own heads is not how others experience us in the real world. It's why we take 200 selfies to get just the right angle, and why we love the filters on SnapChat that smooth out lines and add a bit of otherworldly glow to our faces.

Psychologists identify a gap we all experience sometimes - a gap between how we feel inside and what we actually project outside. How we see ourselves and how others see us. That gap *always* exists, but we're able to ignore it until something happens - you trip while walking straight, or run into a too-clean glass door. Or you make a joke and it doesn't land.

And suddenly it's obvious - to you and everyone else - that the way you see yourself isn't the way everyone else sees you. Maybe you're not as graceful or attractive or clever or moral as you think you are.

There's a gap.

And our natural reaction to this gap is the same as the Biami: we get embarrassed. We try to play it off, make a joke, anything to cover that feeling:

Awkwardness.

[Best Boss] If awkwardness has a poster boy, surely it's Michael Scott from NBC's *The Office*. Michael is the regional manager of a failing paper company. He bought himself a mug that reads "World's Best Boss" and he truly believes it's well-deserved. In Michael's own mind, he's the best boss around.

Of course the humor of the show is the fact that Michael is almost wholly incompetent. There's a huge gap between how Michael sees himself and how everyone in his life experiences him.

We laugh because we're cringing so hard - we feel awkward, and we need to release that tension. So we laugh (or, if you're a particularly empathetic person like my wife, you just refuse to watch the show altogether. It's too painful.)

Now here's the problem:

How do we know we're NOT Michael Scott? How do we know we're seeing ourselves clearly?

[Fun House] One of the most difficult truths of human nature is that we don't know ourselves. We're masters of self-deception. Consider this singular truth that will melt your brain: we have never once seen ourselves exactly as others do. Mirrors reverse our images - it's why photographs of ourselves look slightly weird. The closest we can get to seeing ourselves as others do is with videos and pictures. The self I experience and the me you experience are never the same, especially in real time.

So the question we're going to ask in this series is, "How can we learn to see ourselves as we are in the world? How can we learn to see past our self-deceptions? How can we know ourselves more truthfully?"

Here's the good news: God sees us as we truly are. God knows us completely, and if we are willing to stay in the awkward, God will show us who we really are.

Teaching Two

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, the season of the Church year we set aside to search ourselves for sin, to confess our sin and ask God for help.

Lately, I've been haunted by the power of self-deception. Yes, we're all sinners, and we're all pretty good at making a list of the sins we're working on. But what about the ways we're sinful and *unaware of*? I tell myself I have a little bit of a temper, but my friends and family walk on eggshells around me. I think maybe I could work a little bit less, but everyone else can see I'm killing myself. I consider myself a kind person but women in my office feel uncomfortable around me. I'm not a racist, but...

How do we know what it's like to be on the other side of us? Especially in terms of sin, if we can't see ourselves clearly, it's possible, even *likely* that we're living with sin that's become so comfortable for us that it's just our daily reality?

What do we do?

We begin by praying with the Psalmist Brenda read earlier:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life. -- Psalm 139:23-24

This is a scary prayer because we're asking God to reveal that Awkwardness Gap. We're literally praying, "God show me the difference between how I see myself and how you see me."

That's why these words come at the end of the Psalm. The whole first part of the psalm is a prayer of thanksgiving, celebrating that God knows us inside and out - that God has known us and loved us since God formed us.

So yes, God sees us for who we really are. Yes, God sees all the sins we know and the sins we don't. But God is ready and willing to heal us if we will turn and ask.

Throughout this series, we're going to look at some of the most awkward encounters in the Bible. These are stories of people who became suddenly aware they weren't as righteous, faithful or godly as they thought. We'll look at how they responded and ask what they might have to say to us, today. How they learned from being forced to stand in the awkwardness gap.

And we'll pray this prayer from Psalm 139 over and over. We'll ask God to make it awkward.

Because, as we'll see, if we're willing to stay in the awkward, we can find the place we need to grow. God meets us there and helps us, heals us.

So yeah, we're going to cringe a little through this series, but cringing is a small price to pay for becoming the people God is calling us to be!

In other words, we don't have to be afraid to see ourselves through God's eyes because there is no one who loves us more than the one who sees us truly.

Guided Prayer Through Psalm 139

O LORD, you have examined my heart and know everything about me.

You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away.

You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do.

You know what I am going to say even before I say it, LORD.

You go before me and follow me. You place your hand of blessing on my head.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to understand!

I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence!

If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the grave, you are there.

If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me.

I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night— but even in darkness I cannot hide from you. To you the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are the same to you.

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb.

Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb.

You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.

How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered!

I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand!

And when I wake up, you are still with me!

O God, if only you would destroy the wicked! Get out of my life, you murderers!

They blaspheme you; your enemies misuse your name.

O LORD, shouldn't I hate those who hate you? Shouldn't I despise those who oppose you?

Yes, I hate them with total hatred, for your enemies are my enemies.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.