

Animate Talk 4 – Forming Me

Good morning Woodland Hills, and good morning, or good afternoon or good evening to all the podrihioners and everyone else who's listening – who knows when they're listening, good whatever to you as well.

I want to also say Happy Mother's Day to all the mothers, good job that you're doing, keep up the good work. My name is Greg Boyd, I'm the senior pastor here at Woodland Hills Church. We're in the middle of a series we're calling Animate. The word animate means to breathe life into something and we're focusing specifically on the issue of the imagination, what Paul calls the mind and the heart; the inner sanctum – the place where we meet God and where the things of God become concrete, vivid, experiential and therefore transforming. So we laid the biblical foundation for this and showed how it's been used throughout church history and how its compatible with what we know about the mind and the brain from neuroscience and then last week we applied this way of interacting with God to our picture of God. This morning I want to apply it to our picture of ourselves, in light of our picture of God. So this message is entitled 'Forming Me'. I'd like to open with a word of prayer.

Father, I pray Lord that as these words are coming out that Lord you would be forming our minds, forming our hearts, shaping us, sculpting us, creating us in Your image. Infuse these words with Your authority because there's no life in them otherwise. For all in this auditorium, for all those listening through podcast or television or any other means we just pray Lord that you would make us pliable in Your hands. Give us open hearts and minds to receive You deeply into our innermost being. In Jesus' name we pray. All God's people said 'Amen'.

I am going to be assisted in this message this morning. I am going to be doing a little bit of team preaching. I've asked a good friend of mine; Chris – welcome Chris (applause) he's going to be up here doing some work. Chris is a sculptor, an artist of sorts. He's here with his lovely wife, Alanda – it's good to have you here, and we've asked him in the light of the whole theme of this series – how truth needs to be incarnated – so we've asked him to, as I am preaching, and as we go into worship after the preaching, just to be sculpting something, however God leads you, whatever comes to you, just sculpt it – and you can start right now. I encourage you as I'm giving this teaching, as the Lord leads you, to look over at what he's doing and see in him, a representation of what God is doing to us every minute. We'll be putting some of his work on the screen throughout the rest of this service.

I'd like to start by reading two passages of scripture, the first is from Genesis, which says in verse 7 “the Lord God formed a man, formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being”: An animated being – animate. Then Psalms 139 it says “For You created my inmost being, You knit me together in my mother's womb, I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made”. Notice there that the psalmist praises God because of who he is. He is awesome and wonderfully made and so affirming that you are a masterpiece work of art is not incompatible with praising God, in fact the two go hand in hand. “Your works” he says, including the work that I am; “Your works”, including me, “are wonderful. I know that full well”.

I have asked Terri Churchill, who is the author of the Animate booklet that we're going through as a congregation to read once again one of her poems. This is the poem for this week and as you listen to these words – listen very, very carefully and watch Chris' work very, very carefully because it so perfectly expresses the truth of who God is, what God's doing in our life and who we are as a result of that. This poem is entitled 'The Way You Love Me'.

*Sometimes I think of You forming me from nothing
Shaping tendon and muscle and bone
To cover the vulnerable places in me
I think of You absorbed in the details
Using Your fingers to tenderly draw the contours of my body
I think of You bending over me to breathe life into my lungs
The intimacy of Your breath in my mouth
This is how You have loved me*

*From the moment You dreamed a dream of me.
This is how You love me even now
As you swim in my veins, and whisper in my ear.
You are the secret I carry in my body.*

It's powerful.

We've been talking about how our relationship with God is mediated by our images of God, our representations in our head about God. All of our emotions are associated with concrete representations in our mind. One of the reasons why we have trouble loving God passionately in a consistent way is because to some degree we have unlovable images of God in our mind. It's the images, the concrete images, rather than the abstract theology that determines how invested, how passionate we will be in our love for God. The same thing is true of our relationship with our self. Our relationship with our self is mediated by the images we have of our self. One of the reasons we have trouble celebrating who we are, loving ourselves, and the bible commands that in fact, as the work of art from the heavenly father we are to love our neighbour as our self – we are to love ourselves, but one of the reasons why we have trouble doing that is because we have unlovable images of our self. Those images, those representations are not abstract information. Our brain, as we've seen in this series, does not run on abstract information, cognitive information, rather we think with concrete images, we think with our imagination – vivid, concrete, embodied representations that are rooted in experience. Things happen in our life, to us, or things that we do, that contain a message and our mind locks that in and under the right situations we re-experience that. There's a message contained in those experiences, those images, those representations and that is what forms us, shapes us, moves us, transforms us more than the cognitive information that we believe.

It happens something like this, and here's an experience that I have shared before but I want to share it again. Here's how the messages get contained in our minds. When I was about five years old in Lansing, Michigan, being raised by my stepmother, who, looking back on it, I can see that she was in a terrible situation and had a lot of stress. I think she had some kind of a breakdown and had a tendency to become abusive when she got angry. There was this one time I remember where she was giving me this bath and I was mad at her, we were always fighting, and I don't remember what the issue was, but I said to her 'I don't like you, and I'm going to run away from home'. She immediately grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the bathtub and carried me by that one arm to the front door of the house and threw me out of the front door, and locked the door. She said 'you want to run away from home? Fine, you're gone'. So I'm outside, naked and wet. I don't know what time of year it was but it was cold and immediately freezing. A car drove by with some kids in the back and they saw me, and I just knew they were laughing and I felt such shame, being naked in the front yard. I began to pound on the front door, begging my stepmother to let me in, promising her that I do love her and that I will not run away from home, but for a long while she did not open that door. I don't know how long I was out there but it seemed like eternity. I know at one point my body was just quaking because of how cold I was.

Now see, that experience has a message in it that is stored in my brain. The message is both a message about authorities and a message about me, it's a message about God ultimately and a message about me. The message about authorities is this; I locked it in at a very young age that authorities can't be trusted, authorities can be arbitrary, they can be cruel. They can turn against you at the drop of a dime and the message that, that communicates to me about my worth is that I live in a very, very scary world and people who say they love you and are supposed to protect you can turn against you and you don't even necessarily have to know why, at the slightest thing. You can be thrown out into the cold, locked out into the cold and you can be shamed. So what it means for me is that I live in a very scary world and I am on my own. You can't trust anyone, they may turn against you. So you just put yourself on a little island where it's safe. Ultimately that becomes a picture about God – what God is like. A picture about what my ultimate worth is and the kind of world I live in. See I can then later on hear the message, and believe the message of the good news of Jesus Christ and know that God is beautiful and He looks like Jesus dying on the cross for me and I believe that and I can know that I am created in His image and I have unsurpassable worth; I can know that intellectually but to the degree that there are concrete representations of God and myself that are encoded in the experience and those things are floating around in my brain, to that degree even though I believe certain things about God and myself, what I'll experience as true is very different from what I believe. I may not even know I have these encoded messages in my brain, but under the right situations they get triggered and that's what I experience as true.

We wonder why our lives and our experience don't match up with our beliefs, it's because there's so much garbage embodied, concrete, vivid, experiential garbage floating around in our brains and in the right situations they're activated and all of us to some degree have been barraged with this. All of us to some degree have been barraged with this, we have messages that don't communicate the truth about who God is and who we are, but under the right situations they get triggered and that's what we experience regardless of what we theoretically believe. There are people listening to this message, I'm sure of it who have some experience embodied; have an embodied lie in their brain, that they're ultimate purpose in life is to give men sexual gratification. They may believe and know that that is not the case but there's going to be part of them that's always going to gravitate toward that because that's what feels appropriate to them. There's others who have an embodied lie in their mind that they're fated to be a failure. Others have an embodied lie that you're just not very important to anybody. Others will have an embodied lie like I did that you can't trust anybody; the world's not safe, you can never give yourself fully in love to anybody. Others might have an embodied lie that you deserve the abuse of men; you always seem to invite into your life and others have an embodied lie that you need to prove your worth and value by what you achieve and what you earn and what you possess and who you impress. Others have an embodied lie that you're damaged goods and you're never going to measure up, or an embodied lie that you're always a victim and you can't help yourself and you're enslaved, just like your father or just like your mother was and you're always going to be in bondage to this chemical or that chemical or porn or whatever it is. That's not just information in our mind, it is experience in our mind that we re-experience every time it gets activated. To the degree that that is the image of ourselves then of course you can't celebrate that, you can't love that; that's not lovable. How we need to, not just know but experience profoundly, deeply, experientially, vividly, concretely receive the truth about who God is and who we are, into our lives. It has got to become experienced reality.

Here's the truth: what Terri said was the truth. You're a masterpiece ...in process, but a masterpiece. God is forming you and shaping you. What is true is what Chris is doing right here. What true is that God at this moment is crafting you, intimately, personally. He is there involved in your life. That is the ultimate truth about who you are. You've got a lot of stuff in your brain and your mind and your life and your history that doesn't agree with that, but that is what is ultimately true. What's true as Terri said (I just love the way she put it), that your heavenly Father, Abba Father, formed you from nothing. Abba Father carefully shaped tendon and muscle and bone to cover the vulnerable parts of your body. What is true is that your heavenly creator, your beautiful creator was absorbed in every detail about you. He tenderly drew the contours of your body as Chris is doing right now. He tenderly drew the contours of your body, attending to every detail. He bent over you and He breathed His breath into your lungs, that's what's true. What's true about you is that God has been looking at you, gazing at you with eyes of unsurpassable love from the moment He first dreamed a dream about you. What's true is that that isn't just something that happened once upon a time in the past, what's true is that that has been happening every second of your life. God sustains you, the Bible says, with the power of His love, with His word. The love that was expressed, the perfect love that was expressed on Calvary, that unsurpassable love has been holding you in existence and shaping you in your existence, moment by moment every nanosecond of your life. What's true is that God has been and is this moment attending to every detail of your life, He is involved in every cell, every blood cell swimming throughout the veins of your body, He is there. He is involved in, He is sustaining every neuron that pops in your brain, every thought that you have. He is the one who gives you every breath that you breathe, out of His love He gives you another breath and every heartbeat, every one of them come out of that perfect love that was expressed on Calvary. He is even now at this moment, with these words and this context, shaping you, fashioning you, attending to the details, intimately involved in your life. That's what's true about God and that's what's true about you.

When God shapes us its an act of absolute tender intimacy. Every Christian believes that God has a plan for their life, because the Bible says so, and every Christian believes that in all things, Romans 8:28, in all things God's working together for the better, for those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose, that's true, that's wonderful. But see, it's possible to believe that God has a plan on how He's going to shape you, it's possible to believe that and yet not experience any of the intimacy of how God does that and how important it is that we see and experience the intimacy of this.

I didn't know this until this week. As I was working on this message and starting to move on the inside of the truth that God is the master sculptor, and beginning to get on the inside of it, I think for the first time in my life in any kind of consistent way, really began to envision God working in my life in the way that Chris is working on this clay right now. I didn't know that my own metaphor that I tend to live in, in terms of understanding and experiencing God's care for me was devoid of this kind of intimacy. If you've been here for any length of time you've heard me give my main analogy for how God works in our life. I tend to see God as the master chess

player and He's infinitely intelligent, and because He's infinitely intelligent He can anticipate every possibility that could ever happen on this chess board and He has a plan in place from the start as to how He'll respond in case that thing happens. That model gives me a lot of assurance and a lot of confidence that God is in control, even though humans have free will and angels have free will and a lot of stuff can happen, but nothing's going to catch Him by surprise because He's been anticipating it from the beginning of the world and has a plan in place and I think that's a great model. But what I never realised until this week is that that model, I think it captures an aspect of God's providential working in my life, yes, but it still puts me on the chess board and God up there and it's almost like God is this very smart computer and I can trust that whatever happens the computer has it factored in but it misses a dimension of intimacy. So what happened is I began to move into this metaphor and I really began to sense God saying to me, "Greg, you're way more important to me than a chess piece on a chess board in a cosmic chess game, and I'm way more to you than the chess master. Greg you are my child, Greg you are my work of art, Yes, I've got plans in place and all of that, but you've got to know how I apply them is not in some kind of cosmic plan, I am personally involved in your life, I am personally shaping you, I am getting my hands dirty in your life". It is an act of intimacy. You look at Chris right here and Chris is not standing far off saying 'I have a plan for this piece', he is in there, he is on his knees paying attention to detail, he is getting his hands dirty, the clay is getting into his pores – he's going to smell a little bit like clay when he's done here. It's getting under his finger nails. He is putting his energy into the work, the attention, the affection into this piece and really this piece is something of an extension of him. I felt the Lord say to me 'Greg that is how I am involved in your life. I am not up there, I am down here. I am right next to you. I got you under my fingernails, I am involved in the details of your life'. You see that invoked something totally different in terms of how I relate to God. That just hits a piece that wasn't hit before. God is right here, shaping me moment by moment, I'm His work, His art piece, His masterpiece. So He's involved in your life, moment by moment, God intimately and tenderly is involved with us and His involvement with us affects Him in the same way as when Chris works on this sculpting piece, the clay gets on Him, we affect God. He's a hands-on providential God. This act of God shaping us is not just tender and intimate but it is also, and this is important, it is interpersonal. I emphasise this point because the potter, clay analogy has been sadly throughout history, sometimes used in a wrong way. I mean some take the potter/clay analogy which you find throughout the Bible and they take it to mean that God exercises coercive, unilateral control over the clay. So whatever happens in the world is exactly how God shaped that clay to be. There are some who even embrace this, what I consider to be a monstrous view of God, where they picture God having this lump of clay and He makes some people to go to heaven and some people to go to hell and then He punishes the people He made bad for being the way He made them, and then turns to the people He made good and says 'now aren't you glad that I didn't do that to you? Praise me for my mercy, because I didn't do that to you'. If you ask the question 'where's the justice or the love?' or the goodness in that the reply you sometimes get is 'who are you to reply back to God 'why have you made me thus? The potter has the right to do whatever He wants. He wants to make you fit to go to hell then that's His right'. I submit to you that the potter/clay analogy in the Bible including in Romans 9, means the exact opposite of that. The exact opposite of that; if you look at in its context, it means the exact opposite. For example the passage that most fleshes out this potter/clay analogy is Jeremiah 18 and here the Lord takes Jeremiah to the potter's house. "I went down to the potter's house" it says "and I saw him working at the wheel, but the pot that he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands, so the potter formed it into another pot...". He revised His plans. "...shaping it as seemed best to Him, then the word of the Lord came to me and said 'can I not do with you, house of Israel, as this potter does?' declares the Lord, 'like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, house of Israel.'". Now pay attention to this, you see the potter was making a certain kind of pot and it got marred, it wasn't turning out right, so the potter revised his plan and formed something different, that was appropriate to the kind of clay he was working with. The Lord says 'I want you to tell Israel that', because you see the Lord had made a prophecy about Israel that judgement was coming and some of the Israelites, if you look at verse 12 of Jeremiah 18, the Israelites said 'its no use! We're done for, God's prophesied against us'. God is saying 'don't become fatalist, don't do that. I'm the potter and you're the clay. Just like this potter revised his plans because the clay got marred, so also I'll revise my plans, if you'll just change, I'll change – I'm the potter, you're the clay, I can do whatever I want and therefore I will respond wisely and appropriately to whatever kind of clay you make yourself. The point of the potter/clay analogy is not God's unilateral coercive control over the clay, it's rather God's incredibly wise flexibility in response to the clay. So when God is intimately involved in our lives, intimately involved; moment by moment, every nanosecond, shaping us and forming us, he doesn't turn us into little puppets, no, we are people and what God does is in response to what is done to us and in response to what we do and in response to the kind of clay that we make ourselves, He shapes us and responds in a loving appropriate way in light of all the things that are going on in our life. The truth is that all of us coming into this world, this fallen oppressed world, all of us are to some degree marred from the get go. It is just part of being born to a fallen race. Some people are marred physically; they're bodies don't reflect God's original perfect design. All of us are to some degree

marred psychologically and emotionally and spiritually. All of us have some tendencies; they feel like built in instincts, that are not in line with God's original design, we're born in this kind of corrupted state, but what we need to know is that the Lord looks at this and He grieves over the marring, over the defects, but He says this 'You've got to know that the marks that are there and that we acquire throughout our life, you have got to know that this does not affect my love for you, it doesn't affect my attention to the detail of your life and it does not affect my ability to transform you into a masterpiece. Human beings put a lot of judgements on to the marring stuff. They say 'this is a good body and that's not a good body. That's a sexy body, that's not a sexy body. This is an able body, this is a disabled body.' But God just looks at this and says 'I see clay that I can make a masterpiece out of and that's what you've got to know about it'. Amen. He'll take even the marring, and He's so wise that He'll take even the marred aspects, the faults and the weaknesses and He weaves them into something that is beautiful and He keeps on pouring His love on us to make us pliable. This last Thursday I went to Chris' studio to observe him doing a little bit of work, so that I might know a little bit more about this analogy that I'm going to be using throughout this message. It always helps to know a little bit about the topic you're going to preach on, I've discovered that over time. One thing that Chris does is occasionally splash water on the clay and I said 'why are you doing that?' and he goes 'well the clay gets kind of stubborn, it gets dry and so to make it pliable I keep putting this water on'. He kind of washes it and he works the water into it. That's exactly what God does to us, the water is His love and as He confronts the wounds and the scars and the stubborn parts of our life and the bondages that we get into, He just pours more love on it and He works it in, He works it in, He works it in. Sometimes He works it so hard it hurts, yes sometimes it hurts, but its all done out of His love. He baptises us in His love. The act of God shaping us moment by moment is tender, intimate, interpersonal. It is also mainly a process of God removing things from our life. Michelangelo said this; a famous statement about how he used to sculpt, he said 'it is not so much that I form something out of the clay or out of the rock, as it is I release the image from the rock. I free the image that I see from the rock'. So he would get a vision if you will of what was inside the rock or inside the clay and then he had to remove everything that was inconsistent with that vision. So for example, here is his 'Moses', he saw this Moses inside this huge rock. The Moses was there he just had to free Moses from all the 'un-Moses' rock that surrounded him. That's exactly what God does in our life. God sees the masterpiece and then in the power of His love, He strips away everything that is not consistent with that masterpiece. What we need to know is that that masterpiece that God sees, that is the truth of who we are, because He is the creator, He is the potter, we are the clay, He can say whatever He wants about us and what He says is that there is a masterpiece. It may be hidden in a whole lot of clay, maybe encased in a whole lot of rock, the masterpiece that you are, that you really are because God's seeing is never inaccurate. If He sees the masterpiece there is a masterpiece and that masterpiece maybe is encased in a whole lot of stuff that is inconsistent with the masterpiece, like the lies that you believe and the faults that you have and the scars that you bear and the things that have been done to you and the things that have been said to you and the things that you yourself have done, a whole lot of history encases that masterpiece but that masterpiece is there, and our job is just to say 'God set us free from all of this false rock, this false clay that keeps it hidden'. It may be that even you can't see the masterpiece, it may be that no one else can see the masterpiece, maybe your Mum and Dad never saw the masterpiece, maybe your spouse doesn't see the masterpiece, your kids maybe can't see the masterpiece, your neighbour can't see the masterpiece but God sees the masterpiece, so who cares what they see? He sees the masterpiece. Our job is to agree with God about that, that's what it means to make Him Lord. 'Your word, counts more than our word'. So believe that, that's what we celebrate; it's not celebrating everything that has happened to us and everything that we have done and all the other stuff in our life, its celebrating the fact that we are the work of His hands, we are the masterpiece in process. God as the master artist looks at the clay and He sees a vision of who we truly are and so He says 'you know what? That lie, that embodied lie, that your purpose is to gratify men's sexual desires, that's got to go, I've got to take that one off because what I see is a radiant, pure and innocent bride of Christ, that's who you really are, so let's get rid of this garbage on your life'. And as the master artist, the master sculptor looks at the clay He sees the vision of who we really are and so He says 'that lie, that you deserve the abusive man that you invited into your life, that's got to go because what I see is a precious daughter who is the King's kid and who knows she's the King's kid and she wants to be treated like a King's kid and she's not taking abuse from nobody, so we've got to strip that one away'. As the master artist looks at the clay and sees the vision of who we truly are, He says 'this lie, this embodied lie, that you can't trust anybody, that's got to go, because what I see is a masterpiece of a person who has received all of my love and all of my boldness and all of my confidence and here she is able to take risks in loving others because her fullness comes from me'. As the master artist looks at the rock or the clay and sees the vision of who we truly are 'He says that lie, that you're damaged goods and you'll never measure up, that's got to go, because see, what I see, and my seeing is always accurate, what I see is a person who knows and walks in the reality that they can do all things through Christ who strengthens them and I see a person who knows that all has been forgiven and made whole. Yes there's a lot of wrong things in the past but they know that the work of Christ is greater than all those sins and they walk in

that forgiveness and they walk in that wholeness and they dance with me freely, that's what I see and everything else that's inconsistent with that has simply got to go'. The master artist looks at the clay and sees the truth, the vision, the masterpiece on the inside and therefore says 'this lie that you'll always be in bondage, that you'll always be afflicted, that you can't help yourself, I've got to work that one out because what I see is this masterpiece of a human being who knows that you're not a victim of anybody, no you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you, I see the masterpiece of a person who knows that they are the walking, talking temple of the Holy Spirit, God Almighty dwells within them, they're filled with my love, they're filled with my joy, they're filled with my peace and they celebrate that in everything that they do. The lie that you have to earn your worth and prove it by what you earn and what you acquire and who you impress, that's got to go, I've got to work that one right out, because I see a masterpiece of a person who's whole fullness of life comes just because I'm the artist and I put it into them. Everything they do is not done to try to get some worth but to express the worth they already have and they know what it is to dance with the Triune God and to live free and to live bold and to live fearlessly'. Our job is to say 'God take it away, if You say there's a masterpiece then there's a masterpiece. Strip away everything as we're going to sing later on, strip away all the weaknesses by the power of Your love, keep pouring that water on us and moulding it into us' and our job is to become pliable in His hands. Say 'Lord take it away, strip it away, reveal, unveil Your masterpiece'.