

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

March 18, 2018 – Fifth Sunday of Lent

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. – Psalm 139:14

Those of you who are regulars here will know that this is my first Sunday back after six weeks convalescence. At the end of January, I was wheeled into an impressive operating room in the Royal Alexandra Hospital, a special operating room equipped with a surgical robot that resembled an enormous spider, like Aragog in Harry Potter's Forbidden Forest, or Shelob in the Lord of the Rings. I, of course, promptly nicknamed it Charlotte! (after the spider in Charlotte's web) 😊

My surgeon was there, which I was pleased by, but more important, the anaesthetist was there. I am okay with having surgery but if I have to choose between surgery and anaesthesia, I will take anaesthesia every time. In my opinion, a surgeon without an anaesthetist is like an arrow without a bow, like onions without the liver, like childbirth without the child. In surgery, the anaesthetist is, however briefly, your best friend.

My new best friend started the drugs and asked me to count backward from ten. I think I got to nine. That's about the last thing I remember for several hours, and when I woke up in the recovery room I no longer had a prostate.

This was my second major surgery, and both times, I have noticed that one lingering after effect of anaesthesia is that I become much funnier, at least in my own mind. Not just my own mind, though. My roommate claimed that she had never had as entertaining a roommate! But it is possible she was just being polite. Possible, but not likely!

But if I were to take away a single lesson from my surgery, it is simply this: the human body is a wonder. For all the miracles of modern medicine, and it really is amazing what they do, what my surgeon did is minor compared to what my body did: the surgeon, with robot Charlotte's assistance, spent a couple of hours messing around inside me, then closed me up, and let the body do its healing work. And go to work the body does: blood vessels constrict and congeal, scar tissue closes over wounds, muscles relearn old tasks, the brain rewires itself to accomplish what it

used to accomplish in other ways. For all the surgical team accomplished, once they were done, they got out of the way and trusted my body to do what the body does. It really is amazing. In the biblical phrase, we really are wonderfully made.

It isn't just in healing that the body is amazing, of course. Every second of your existence, your body is engaged in thousands of complex tasks, most of which you aren't even aware of. Your skin is constantly protecting you against foreign microbes, while releasing exactly the right amount of water vapour to keep you from either overheating on the one hand or dehydrating on the other. Your bones and muscles are constantly rebuilding themselves. Your gut is breaking down the food you put into your mouth into molecules that can be absorbed. Your lungs are extracting oxygen from the air and releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Your blood is transporting oxygen and nutrients to every cell in your body and picking up waste products. Your liver and kidneys are detoxifying your blood and flushing out the waste. Your endocrine and nervous systems are regulating your breathing, your heart rate, your blood pressure, and a hundred other variables to keep you functioning well. This picture shows some of the different bodily systems that make you, you.



It shows the pulmonary, skeletal, muscular, digestive, circulatory and nervous systems, but it leaves out a lot: the endocrine and lymphatic systems to name only two. In truth, it likely leaves out most of what is really going on, including everything that happens within our organs and our cells, and the way in which our bodies play host to billions and trillions of microbes, which are essential to our health – we are in fact ecosystems. And eastern understandings of the human body would show an energy system, complete with seven chakras. When I think of how complex and intricate the body is, it is amazing to me that I am alive at all, let

alone that things work as well as they do. Truly, I am wonderfully made. And so are you!

Of course with so much going on, it is not surprising that things go wrong sometimes, and here is the fearful part. My body wouldn't have needed the surgery if something hadn't gone wrong in the first place, if cells in one of my organs hadn't started misbehaving. If I had to take away a single lesson from my diagnosis with prostate cancer, it would simply be that my body, for all of its resilience, is fragile, and that I, like all of us, am mortal. I fully expect to live for many more years, but for the rest of my life, I will be a cancer patient. Even if I die of something else, which many people with prostate cancer do, I will die with this disease. Cancer has brought the awareness of my mortality into my consciousness with the intensity of a scalpel operating without the anaesthesia.

We all know that we are mortal, that just as our lives have a beginning, so also they will one day have an end. But most of the time, I have managed (and I suspect that we all manage) to confine that knowledge to some vague, intellectual awareness that someday, hopefully in the far-away future, I will stop living. But the diagnosis of cancer brings that vague awareness into sharp focus, and forces my heart to come to terms with the abstract knowledge that my brain has long kept at the back of my awareness. And the knowledge that we are mortal means that we are not just wonderfully made; we are also fearfully made.

But the fear cannot easily be separated from the wonder, or the wonder from the fear. Stephen Hawking, the legendary theoretical physicist who died this week, who was himself no stranger to both how fearful and how wonderful the human body can be, once remarked that as vast and mysterious as the universe is, it would be empty without those he loved, and those who loved him. It is the presence of those other mortal and fragile bodies that make our existence meaningful. And without that meaning, the most amazingly complex body would not be nearly so wonderful. If we were immortal, our time would not be precious. Because we are mortal, when we offer each other the gift of time, it is a precious gift, it is THE precious gift, the gift that makes us fearfully and wonderfully made.

Nearly 80 years ago, Lou Gehrig, the great baseball player who gave his name to the same disease that afflicted Steven Hawking, spoke of the wonder that

accompanied his own fearful diagnosis. Gehrig had played sixteen seasons with the legendary New York Yankees team that included Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb and won six World Series, setting many records as a batter. He was the team captain in the spring of 1939 when his rapidly declining strength was becoming painfully obvious. After playing a record 2,130 consecutive games, he voluntarily withdrew himself from the line-up for “the good of the team.” Within a few weeks he was diagnosed with ALS, and when the diagnosis became public, ball fans everywhere began to grieve. The Yankees had a Lou Gehrig Appreciation Day. Since Gehrig wore jersey number four, they held the Appreciation on the fourth day of July, between the two games of a double header. The Yankees retired his jersey, which had never been done before by any sports team, and sportsmen and politicians extolled his virtues as a ball player and a friend. In a short speech that some have called “the Gettysburg Address of baseball” Gehrig referred to his diagnosis as a “bad break,” but said that he considered himself “the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” He was lucky, he went on, to have played with his fellow ball players, to have worked with the Yankees organization. He was lucky to have the respect and affection of groundskeepers and opponents. He had a “wonderful mother-in-law,” parents who were unfailing supportive, and “a wife who has been a tower of strength.” Yes, his illness was a bad break, but the people who surrounded him made his life a wonderful one.

In the same way, I consider myself very lucky. When I woke up in the recovery room, after my surgery it was wonderful to me that my wife Therese was there waiting. And it was wonderful to me that her friend Rita was keeping her company, making the waiting bearable. And it was wonderful to me that my family and friends called and visited to express their care and support. It was wonderful to me that over the last six weeks council chair Roberta Dubois checked in on behalf of the congregation every Sunday morning and sent me a prayer to nourish my spirits. And it was wonderful to me that many of you sent cards and books or found other ways to show your care. It was wonderful to me that in all these many ways you have kept reminding me that I am not alone in this vast and mysterious universe, that I am not alone in this fragile and mortal body, that I am surrounded by other fragile and mortal bodies, who know how to support each other because you have found support at similar times of fragility and vulnerability. Part of the wonder of the way we are made is that we share these fearfully and wonderfully

made bodies, that we cling together in families and communities and congregations to help each other face our fear, and that the wonder of it helps us to deal with the fear, and the fear of it increases our wonder. We are indeed “fearfully and wonderfully made,” and for that I offer thanks and praise.

Psalm 139

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.