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Genesis 1 and 2
Swipe Right
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If you have not had the opportunity to date lately, you may be surprised to learn that there is an app for that, in fact, many apps for that. I won't out any of you, but I happen to know there are people in this room who met the loves of their lives through a dating app. I met John at a bar, so please don't hear any judgment from me as I talk about this.

This week, I fell down the dating app rabbit hole because this week's movie, *Better Nate Than Ever* had me thinking about self-image and relationships and how they are connected. One thing I find intriguing about dating apps is that a person looking for a date can very quickly eliminate people they are not interested in. The app presents pictures and short profiles of people who may or may not be a good match. Potential daters, can scroll through the options and swipe left on their device to eliminate the people they are not interested in. Or they can swipe right, indicating interest, and if the other person happens to swipe right on their picture and profile as well, then the two can message each other. I learned this week that, based on a person's swipes, dating app algorithms learn what types of people each person is interested in, so the app gets more efficient at choosing the right "type" as it is used.

I mean, it is efficient. But are relationships supposed to be efficient? How much can you learn about someone from a few well curated photos and heavily edited profile? If I wanted to get on a dating app, I would probably use my professional headshot for the picture because it has been well-filtered and I would not mention that I don't like watching movies, I watch and read news a lot, and I'm obsessive when it comes to hummingbirds and order. Who wouldn't want to date that? Letting people see who we really are is risky and makes us feel vulnerable and we don't really like that.

In *Better Nate Than Ever*, the main characters, Nate and Libby, are middle school students who teach us lessons in vulnerability, dream-chasing, allowing ourselves to become who we were created to be, and being cheerleaders for other people as they become who they were created to be. They remind us that nobody can

live life alone and it's wonderful, in a world that can be isolating, when we realize that we really do have a place to belong.

Nate loves musical theater. He knows all the lyrics to "Corner of the Sky" from the 1970s musical *Pippin*. He also knows that *Wicked* should have won the 2004 Tony award instead of Avenue Q and that somehow, some day, he is destined to perform. He is talented and funny and smart. But middle school is rough for a lot of young people like Nate. He was bullied and didn't have a lot of friends. In fact, he only has one friend. But, with a friend like Libby, one is enough.

The movie begins as Nate wakes up to George Benson's "On Broadway," and dances in his bunny slippers, excited and anxious to find out if he has been cast as the lead in the middle school musical about Abraham Lincoln. On his way out the door that morning, we meet Nate's older brother, Anthony, who is a star athlete, and generally embarrassed by Nate's appearance and interest in theater.

If there had been an app to choose siblings, Anthony would definitely have swiped left when he got to his brother's picture and profile. We swipe left a lot, even without the app, don't we? We catch a glimpse of someone, how they look, how they act in a moment, and we quickly decide, no, that person is not someone I want in my life. But God calls us to see beyond first impressions and to embrace the ways in which other people are different from us, rather than surrounding ourselves only with people who are think like us, like what we like, and look a certain way. Because the truth is, while we were all created beautifully unique, we all have something in common. We each reflect the image of God. The Christian tradition has gotten that idea, right from the beginning.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," the creation story in Genesis 1 begins. The story describes God's raw materials as chaos and emptiness. God organized the chaos, separating light from darkness and land from sea. And God created the moon, sun, and all the stars. God filled the oceans and the air with all kinds of creatures, and as God organized and created, God declared all of it, "good." God filled the land with animals and declared all of them good, even mice. And then in Genesis 1:26, reading from *The Inclusive Bible*, "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, to be like us. Let them be stewards of fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals, and everything that crawls on the ground.' Humankind was created as God's

reflection: in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them."After blessing them and showing them around, God declared all of it good, in fact, very good. And then God rested.

I read this specific translation because it's a new translation and I am loving some of the choices the editors made. One of the choices I really love is the last verse I read, verse 27: "Humankind was created as God's reflection: in the divine image God created them..."
The idea that human beings were created in the image of God has had a powerful influence on what we believe about humankind. Scholars have debated exactly what the original storytellers and writers meant when this was first uttered. These varying interpretations emphasize either certain qualities or characteristics given to human beings or the roles and responsibilities assigned to us.

Early Christian thought emphasized connecting the image of God with human nature, particularly, the unique spiritual character of human beings. It is unlikely this is the direction intended, though, because in the ancient Jewish tradition, there was a not a separation between the body and spirit. They say human beings as whole people, not two parts: body and soul. Modern progressive theologians, with the desire to interpret scripture from the lens of inclusion, inviting people in oppressed groups to see themselves in the stories, have talked about the divine image in terms of the sanctity and worth of all human beings and, because of that, all human beings must be treated with equal dignity and justice. Unlike the early Christian interpretation, this characterization of human nature focuses on the whole person rather than the soul alone.

Another interpretation that is helpful to us today highlights the role of human beings in the world, as partners or representatives of God in the created world, called to care for the world as God would care for what God has created. My personal theology is a combination of these other interpretations. For me, reflecting the image of God means that each one of us has something of God within us and our job is to care for ourselves, each other, and creation as we would imagine our loving Creator would care for us.

In the movie, the differences between Nate and Anthony, and their ways of reflecting God in the world, caused tension between the brothers and, frankly, made Nate feel like he didn't belong in his own family. Certainly, tension between

siblings is not unusual and making people feel excluded because they are different happens all the time. Anthony made fun of the way Nate dressed and made a big deal about the lip gloss Nate chose to wear. The ways in which Nate was different made him a target for bullying at school as well.

After the unpleasant encounter with his brother before school, the school bus bully greeted him as he found his seat, “No more girls in this row…go on, ladies first.” The encounter ends with Nate impulsively taking a swipe at the bully’s face and accidentally landing it, drawing blood. The bully responds, “You better watch your back in the halls today, Loser.”

Nate gets to school and finds out he did not get the part in the musical. As he rants to Libby in the bathroom, he says, “You realize what this says about me, don’t you? My parents are right, I should just give up on my dream.” But, thanks to Libby, a bigger dream appears. She comforts him with the news that there are open auditions in New York for a new musical based on “Lilo and Stitch,” the animated Disney film about a Hawaiian girl who befriends a space creature. At first, he is excited at the possibility, and then, as they leave the bathroom, the bully from the bus threatens him again and Nate says to Libby, “You know what, forget New York, I’m just trying to survive 7th grade.

But, when Nate arrives home that afternoon, he finds out that both his parents and his brother are going to be away for the weekend. Much to Anthony’s annoyance, Nate gets permission to stay with Libby for the weekend. Anthony says, “You would never let me stay at a girl’s house.” His dad responds, “You are not Nate. Nate is different.” That being settled, Nate and Libby sneak off to Manhattan on an overnight bus.

When they discover they cannot audition without a parent or guardian, they conveniently run into Nate’s Aunt Heidi, an actress supporting herself as a caterer. Aunt Heidi is Nate’s mom’s sister. The two haven’t spoken since Heidi chose to go to an audition instead of Nate’s parents’ wedding. A lot happens in New York and, again and again, Libby is Nate’s biggest cheerleader and supporter. She even sacrifices her own audition to cover for Nate so he can sneak in with someone else’s audition number.

Nate does not get chosen initially for a call back, so Libby and Nate board a bus home. Just as the bus is leaving, Nate gets a call back. Nate wants to get off the bus and he wants Libby to come with him. Libby tells Nate she has to go home and wants him to come with her. And she confesses, as she puts her hand on his, that the only reason she does the theater stuff is to be with him. Nate is shocked and he tells her how much he cares about her, but says, "Libby, I am not like that." He takes his backpack and leaves. The hurt and sadness on Libby's face tells the whole story.

Later that day, when Anthony returns home, he finds out, through a TikTok video, that Nate is in New York. He freaks out and goes to find Libby. Libby and Anthony drive back to New York to retrieve Nate. The rest of the movie is a series of events in which the people in Nate's life show him that he belongs. We get to see a different side of Anthony who, as Nate loses his confidence in his final audition, shouts, "You don't embarrass me. I promise. You don't embarrass me, Nate." Nate finishes his audition by singing this song.

Gift of Music: "No One Gets Left Behind" from *Better Nate than Ever* (Alex, Callie, and Eli)

"I realized I belong, my family's been here all along
And boy it's good to have a friend."
This song says perfectly what the director of *Lilo and Stitch* said to Nate when, before singing. Nate asked her why Stitch was able to speak in complete sentences in the song, but not in real life. She answered, "Musicals allow us to say things we can't actually say in real life."

Throughout the film, Libby was the constant, the one always on his side, even when she realized her relationship with Nate was going to be different than she imagined. She went back to New York with Anthony to bring Nate home, but she made sure he was able to go to his final audition. "…family means no one gets left behind."

In the final moments of the movie, Nate is back in the bathroom, this time without Libby. He sees his reflection in the mirror and calls himself a loser. And then he hears someone in a stall singing "Corner of the Sky" from Pippen. It's the bully. Nate tells him his secret is safe with him and the bully is left standing in the

bathroom, stunned and relieved. Nate is called to the office. When he gets there, his parents and Libby are there, and he learns he has gotten the part of Stitch for two matinees a week and when the star is sick. Nate chased his dream and caught it, but not without the help of his family, both chosen and biological.

We were not made to go through life alone. Recall that in the creation story in Genesis 1, God created and declared it all good. In a very different creation story in Genesis 2, in verse 18, following the creating of the first human, we hear God say, "It is not good for the earth creature to be alone. I will make a fitting companion for it." All that God created was good, but it was *not good* for a human being to be alone forever. We need each other. Our purpose in this world is to love and care for each other, even when we are different, even when we don't look alike or like the same things, or believe the same things, or fall in love with the same kind of people.

We were each created to reflect something about God into the world. When we swipe left too quickly, we miss something of God. In the movie, that moment when Anthony really saw Nate, when he was on stage auditioning, was such a great moment. Suddenly, he appreciated his brother for the unique, fabulous person he was created to be. We need more of those moments, dear ones.

And the only way to have them is to meet each other, to get to know each other, and in the words of Ted Lasso, "to be curious and not judgmental." Swipe right when someone takes a risk and shows you who they really are without a filter, amid whatever weird chapter of their life you have walked in on.
Allow yourself to be vulnerable and to show the world who you really are. The world needs you and the image of God you were created to reflect into the world. You are loved so much by your Creator and by the people in your life. More than you know.
Amen.