

The Image of God

Series: The Gospel of Genesis

Note: The SD Card recording our sermons failed last week and has been subsequently smashed.

GENESIS 1:26-2:1 (NIV)

26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

27 So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” 29 Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. 31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

1 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. 2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

The ironic fact is that humanism which began with man's being central eventually had no real meaning for people. On the other hand, if one begins with the Bible's position that man is created by God and in the image of God, there is a basis for that person's dignity." - Francis Schaeffer

IT WAS GOOD

What is fascinating about the Genesis 1 story of Creation (Genesis 2 approaches it from a different angle), is what Eugene Peterson describes as a "rhythmic structure." I love the repetition of the creation story. And God said. Let there be. And it was so. And God saw that it was good. Evening and morning. The x day.

We get so consumed by the details, and discussions about how quickly or how long it might have unfolded that we often bypass the beauty of the deliberative nature of God creating, speaking and it resulting in what is good. The image you should have here is the image of artist painting on a canvas. He puts down the light - yeah, that's good. He puts down the sky - yeah, that's good. He puts down the water - yeah that's good. He puts down the foliage - yeah, that's good. He puts down the sun and the moon and the stars - that's good. Then the animals - yeah, that's good.

I mean truly, does God need time to accomplish what he wills? Could not creation have simply come into being immediately? God, rather chooses time to accomplish what he wills. There's this deliberative building that we can all identify with. Building a house - pouring the foundation, putting up the forms, hoisting the trusses, tacking on the shingles, and so on. The process of creating.

Why this is important? Two reasons. First, what God created he described as good. It wasn't thrown together. God deliberately created something with care, with intention, with beauty, with design. Most of the world's religions see the world as something that is transitory, that is evil, something to be destroyed in order that the spirit life may live. The Christian view sees the world as good - created by God, a physical reality that will exist forever. Now, that goodness has a fall to it - as we will see later - but the world that God created is both good (*against Gnosticism*) and yet most certainly not God (*pantheism*)

Second, what he creates takes time. It would be nice to imagine a world created with the snap of a wrist. And it would be nice to imagine a life transformed with a snap of a wrist. It doesn't work that way. Pastorally, I want the snap of a finger in response to my prayers. Yet, I know that goodness and beauty have a deliberative, creative process that only God gets the credit for. The Bible talks about God making new creations through their faith in Christ (2 Corinthians 4). New Creations are always God's work and the unfold according to God's time- not ours.

This is why farmers really get the Bible - that which is good, the good fruit, takes time to grow. It's a deliberative, patient process of bringing something out of nothing. God actually takes his time to create that which is good. Remember - God first made it all good. How? I don't know. But his fingerprints are all over it.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

This goodness and the taking of time comes to its highest fulfillment in the creation of the human. Of all creation, though, when we get to the human - created both male and female - there is a distinction to be made from the rest of creation. The world is not created in the image of God - the world in no way shape or form contains God. The living life of the world is not created in the image of God. The animals of the world are not created in the image of God. It is the human who is made in the image, and the likeness of God.

What does this mean?

The Image of God means that we reflect who God is. To reflect God is reflect his goodness, love, and character, his truth his grace. We are not God. We always will exist in complete dependence upon God. Yet, we are created in the image of God and therefore created to be in relationship with him. To reflect God and to be made in his image indicates the immense worth of the human being above all creation. There is something distinctive about the human life, and the only place where we find this truth is in Scripture.

THE MODERN WORLD

We live in the shadow of a modern world most typified by the philosophy, ethics, and political program of Nazi Germany. In so many ways they ushered us into a world. And yet, Germany was not run by neanderthals. They were the intellectual, philosophical, scientific giants of the world. They presented carefully articulated reasons and rationales for everything they did and they recorded it all with shocking detail.

What was distinctive about their approach:

- We all know their racial prejudice against the Jews - killing over 6 million of them
- They were opposed to interracial marriage, wanting to preserve a pure Aryan race
- They slowly but systematically euthanised people with disabilities, with the elderly, with varying psychological disorders - all in the interests of what was in the best interests of the state
- They were pioneers of eugenics - trying to control genetic purity. In doing so they encouraged abortion, infanticide and sterilization of those not of their race (particularly Jewish) as well as those with disabilities.
- They couched everything they did in language preserving the interests of the German people.
- They did this all with religious language, proclaiming themselves to be, as Hitler said: "Whoever would dare to raise a profane hand against that highest image of God among His creatures [i.e. Aryans] would sin against the bountiful Creator of this marvel and would collaborate in the expulsion from Paradise."

The world has reflected upon this horror and continues to struggle to make sense of it. Yet, the modern world has no capacity to critique Hitler on moral grounds, other than it appears to them that what he did was tragically awful. But why? If human life is just another form of animalistic existence, wouldn't a survival of the fittest ethic work in the benefit of a Nazi program? Christians, however, have a clear answer to the horrors of World War II. It was, at its heart, a denial of the image of God in others. It had no respect for human life. It was therefore wrong.

PERSONAL EXAMPLES

Every Christian must come to terms with the truth of the image of God and its implications for our ethics, for our ministry and for the ways in which we live as a church. So, this morning I'm going to push a little bit on this - giving examples in my own life of how the doctrine of the image of God has challenged me and pushed me to help understand the world God has made and how I'm to live in it.

Racism - I grew up on a native American reservation in Montana. I grew up with native American friends, as we were a unique reservation where anyone could own property, so we had a unique mix. I didn't think much of it until I got into high school and began to see the effects of racism both ways in our communities. Furthermore, when for sporting events we would go off the reservation, we were often the subject of ridicule - the Roman *Chiefs*. And when we went to a predominantly native American reservation, we were disdained for being mixed company, and not full-bloods, literally in the form of cheers from the stands: *They're not full-bloods*. In many ways, our reservation has done remarkably well with reconciliation, but there is much work to do. This is an image of God question with many further implications.

Sanctity and Disability - When my wife and I lost our first baby, in our anxiety over our second pregnancy we went through a number of tests, one of which came back with a purported likelihood of a potential disability. [We later learned the test was absurdly unreliable] When we went in for a further 3D test of what would be Mr. Andrew, we were ushered into a counselor's office and given options, describing a variety of disabilities that would be reasonable and understandable for the termination of a pregnancy. As my wife vocally stopped her mid-sentence, clearly indicating that we were not here for options, as we would love any child God gave us, I went into my quiet place, stunned, and literally recalling German texts of 30s and 40s that I read in seminary arguing for the protection of a society from the infirm and genetically problematic. Only here, it was being couched in American individualistic terms about our needs and abilities, and would the potential struggle be worth it. That was a horrifying moment for me - would America participate in the systematic removal of anybody under the banner of being disabled or affected *in utero*? This is a deeply important image of God question.

Trafficking - Early in my time here as pastor I was invited by Mark Labberton over at First Presbyterian Berkeley to participate in a Global Church Conference, and our church

participated as a sponsor. I was exposed to the truth of modern slavery, listening to the stories (in particular) of those who had been rescued from sex trafficking and work camps as well as those serving as lawyers arguing on behalf of those caught in slavery (particularly *International Justice Mission*). For me this was an issue that wasn't on my radar at all - I didn't see it in my backyard (or thought I thought). Why should I bother? Well, this is Nazi German work camps all over - and yet we sent young men over there, to rescue people from those camps. I think of my friend Andy McQuaid (who was on the search team that invited me here to EPC), who was D-Day plus 4, part of the push to rescue those in captivity and works camps. And some of these camps included folks like my father-in-law's father, who was imprisoned behind enemy lines. Why do we care about these things? Because this is an image of God question.

The Prisoner - Last example. The hardest for me. I was accepted into a chaplaincy program prior to my final year in Seminary, at a medium security prison in Spokane Washington. I preached for services, I led bible studies, I did admin work for the chaplain office and I met with and counseled inmates. Most of them were there for a variety of stupid reasons - but I could handle that, drug offenses, robbery, financial impropriety, run-ins with the law. But I met one young man, who was ardent in trying to seek God, and his faith. I was impressed. I asked what he was in for. I was told, that as a teenage boy he had removed his parents from this world. I was stunned. And I was supposed to see the image of God in him? That was more than I could take. This is beneath me, I thought. I struggled the rest of my time there with him. And yet, once again, with a personal example, God was pushing me to go to places I was not going to go on my own - to see even the image of God in such dark places. To see in someone else what God sees. As difficult as something like this can be, it is an image of God question.

This is a discussion that reaches in so many different directions: questions of migrants and immigration, not merely in Europe but in America. Questions of the abysmal treatment of women in South America and Africa. Questions of end of life issues with the elderly and advocacy of active euthanasia. The list goes on and on.

Please understand - there are many tough issues to discuss on the boundaries of these questions - particularly when we get to the rule of law. There are tough examples to deal with on the periphery of an issue, and to be certain, the image of God discussion does not eliminate the need to talk seriously about sin. Yet those difficult questions don't define our ethics. We have to start with God's Word first, before we get to our tougher questions - and it means that

we start with the question of the Image of God. When we do not start there, our ethics are immediately on the road to that of horrific, religiously veiled nationalistic ethics of Nazi Germany.

Can I ask a question here? What political party gets all of this right? What political party in the world has in their manifesto a statement that says that everything we do starts with an understanding of people made in the image of God? Good night, if Nazi Germany doesn't teach us anything it should teach us that we do not sell our soul to political party. As Christians we have to speak Christian truth to all political platforms. I personally believe that its possible to get weak-kneed ethically in order to preserve various economic and political interests - or stay in power. We need to remember that we are *Christians* first.

THE IMAGE OF GOD IN THE CHURCH

But on the whole, what I am saying here, though, is the Christian cannot bypass the question of the image of God with respect to our faith and our ethics. These tests changed greatly how I pastor - for before I get to speak truth I need to recognize the image of God in this person first.

Who is going to stand up for the weak, and the poor, the disabled, the widow, the sick, the prisoner, precious little life, and precious old yet weak life, regardless of the gender, and their nationality, and whether or not they have any disabilities. Who is going to treat with dignity the prisoner of war, who is going to run into slave camps or rescue women from brothels? Why should we do any of this? Because they are made in the image of God.

How we speak, furthermore, how we treat people as we advocate this truth, even those we disagree with, matters greatly. We need to greatly heed what James 3:9-10 say:

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

Do you understand what this means? In our mockery of even our enemies, in our cursing of those we disagree with, can put into question the very authenticity of our worship of the Lord. We can't do both.

Therefore, we would do well to avoid reducing people and difficult issues to bumper sticker theology. Christians in protest demonstrations screaming and yelling at others violates the James 3 test. We need to have actual, respectful theological and ethical conversations with people - not take shots from the sidelines. The world often does not see what we see simply because we have failed to present a compelling rationale for why we believe *what* we believe, and have often accompanied that failure with dismal behavior. This should not be - as James said.

The only Christian bumper sticker you should have on your car is “Pastor Troy is my homeboy.” :)

What would it look like for us to be a church that believed that human life is made in the image of God? We would enter every room and enter every conversation with a belief that the image of God in a person is the most important place to start. Conversions only unfold when this is primary.

We would also treat everyone who violated the image of God with respect to their sin, their choices, with dignity and compassion as well. They are not projects to be fixed. They are not people we get to write people off, or call them names, or put the scarlet letter on their chest, consigned to the back row. No. We do speak the truth in love, we do pray for and hope to participate in discipleship change. Yet we begin by seeing them in the image of God, even when that image of God appears deeply broken.

What can we do about political matters? I don't recommend constantly reading social media and watching the news and being ticked off all the time. Perpetually angry people who exist primarily in light of an illuminated screen don't change the world. Quit talking about how concerned you are and actually something with and for someone made in the image of God. It's the Pharisee that sits at home and says, see I'm right, they're wrong. It's the Christian who gets their hands dirty. It's the Christian who without show or fanfare or publicity gets involved in the trenches. Write letters to your senators and representatives on various matters. Volunteer for organizations like a shelter, or a crisis center. Support ministries financially. Start a bible study over coffee with someone *who is not a Christian*. Pray. You can do far more locally, or in the mission field, face to face with real people, with real names, made in the image of God, than you could ever do for God on-line.

When I visited the concentration camp of Dachau in Munich, there was a sign as you entered, written in 5 languages - Hebrew, French, English, German, Russian. It said, "Never again." The world doesn't have the worldview to really keep that promise. The Christian worldview does. Never again - because we believe that humans are created in the image of God.

FOR YOU

Finally, here's some practical things for you to do. In your prayers for someone who is lost, deeply troubled, discouraged, or one who is deeply frustrating to you - ask God to help you to somehow begin to see that person as one made in the image of God.

Maybe you've never done this as well? As you kiss your children before they sleep, or hug a loved one, I'm kissing the image of God. Yes, their life is worth more than anything else in the world. Their life is not dispensable for society, for convenience, for the good of the whole.

Finally, in light of your own brokenness and sin - still have the courage look at yourself in a mirror, and know that you are made in the image of God and yet in the marring of the image, the one who is the perfect image of God came and restored that image in you. In his life. In his death. In his resurrection. Every person he met he treated as one made in the image of God.

As Colossians 1 puts it:

*15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him **to reconcile to himself** all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

Believe him.