

Scripture: Genesis 1:26-31

The Image of God

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O Lord, your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Please send your Spirit into this place that this word might be your Word and that this church might live as your body.
Amen.

Genesis 1:26-31: Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

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

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

God has been busy. Before the passage I just read, God has shaped heaven and earth and filled them with life. All of this is accomplished with a word. God says, “Let there be...” and so it was. Light, dark, water, land, plants, animals. God is powerful and innovative in these first few days.

However, in this section of the text, God speaks and then actually does the creating. Just like the lines of poetry of this chapter, humanity was carefully crafted. It shows us the basis for the care and attention God gives to humanity. What a comforting passage! For if God cared enough to personally create humans, humanity must be pretty special.

God doesn't say that humanity gets this special treatment because it is smart or strong or fun to have around. Instead, God chooses to bless humanity. This blessing is then followed by instructions to fill the earth and care for all its creatures. God speaks directly to humanity, not just about it.

Moreover, the text says that humanity was created in the image of God. Surely that is a good thing, but what does it really mean?

When I normally use the word image, I am usually talking about a picture or a portrait, an attempt to capture what something looks like. We say to little kids, “You are the spitting image of your father!” Images fill my computer screen each day, representing real people, places, and things.

Most of these images are static and unchanging and are primarily concerned with appearance. This kind of image doesn't seem to fit what God meant. Humans are certainly not fixed; we all grow and change throughout the course of our lives. There is no standard human. We are all different; and these differences are not deviations from the image of God but aspects of that image.

Plus, we are all much more than just what we look like. We think and solve problems; we love and make friends; we speak and tell stories. Being made in the image of God also seems to directly tie into our relationship to the rest of creation. In the same way that God has created and cared for the whole universe, humans are to care for all the living things in the sea, in the air, and on the earth. That is a big job!

More than one of my seminary professors¹ have talked about the image of God in terms of a prism. A prism is one of those little glass or plastic things that you use in third grade science class to try to split light. You can turn it around and around and it will split light in different ways, dividing white light into many different colors.

The science is the same that produces rainbows. White light filters through clouds in just the right way to show the whole spectrum of color. Just as any one color in a rainbow or view through the prism is not identical to the white light that produced it, no single person is the perfect image of God.

The point is that we can't really understand what exactly it means to be made in the image of God, but we can see different aspects of that image in one another. None of us is perfect, but we all are made in the image of God.

Though there are many ways that we are like God, it is also important to remember we are not identical to God. We are created good, but not perfect. Just as we all reflect the image of God, we all obscure it as well. It can be easy to get wrapped up in our own imperfections. We forget that others are just as important and valued as we are. We argue and hurt one another. We think only of ourselves and our desires. Those that are supposed to love us the most can hurt us the most.

Especially when it is hard for us to live together is when it is most important for us to remember that we are each created in the image of God. It reminds us of one another's inherent value and that we are supposed to love and to be in relationship with one another. It is sometimes helpful

1 George Stroup used this image in Introduction to Theology I class, and Bill Brown mentions it in his book.

for me to remember this about others, particularly when we are having a hard time getting along. One simple example I think of is the Disney version of Beauty and the Beast.

At the beginning of the story, Belle cannot find any redeeming characteristics in the Beast who has mistreated her father and prohibited her from ever leaving or seeing him again. He does try several times to make small peace offerings by inviting her to dinner and such, but she will not budge.

That is until the scene out in the snow, when all the little birds come and land on him to feed. Something in that silly moment helps her to see that perhaps the Beast isn't all bad. From that point on, they are able to build a relationship. Sometimes looking for just a glimpse of the image of God in one another helps us to begin to trust. Then we can continue the work of caring for creation entrusted to us by God.

This passage in Genesis does not say that God created one person but all of humanity in the image of God, male and female. Together we are the image of God. We are at our best when we are in relationship with one another. We profess that we believe in one, triune God. One God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The God we love and serve is in community. Therefore, we more closely reflect the image of God when we are in community.

Just as the three persons of the Trinity do not exist separately from one another, we are not created in isolation. We are able to love and to be loved. We need others and have responsibilities to them. Relating to those who are different from us is vitally important, and our relationship to God is reflected in the way we relate to one another.

The world may not seem so great to all of us all the time. There are wars around the world. Neighbors and families are without jobs. The weather is doing weird things. Though it may be hard to see, just as the image of God can be hard to see, this text tells us that God created the world good. Just as God paid special attention to creating humanity at the beginning, God continues to bless us.

In all of this, we still do not really understand who we are and how we should live without considering Jesus Christ. We know that we should live in community, but Jesus is the one who teaches us how to interact with one another. He shows us our hope for the future. In his time on earth, he repeatedly turned from himself to others, just as we are supposed to turn from ourselves to others and to the rest of creation. Jesus healed the sick, ate with sinners, taught the masses, and cultivated relationships.

Though he had all authority on heaven and earth, Jesus did not assert his power but became a servant to all, granting each person dignity and respect.

Pastor Tom read the very last thing that Jesus says to the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

He is risen from the dead, and he doesn't say, "Look at how great I am" or "Just keep living your lives the way you always have." He sends them out to encounter other people to teach them to love. This is what it means to be the image of God. This is how we are called to be the image of God. "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Even now, God sees everything that God has made, and indeed, it is very good. Amen.