

WE BELIEVE: CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE

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Genesis 1:26-31 James 3:7-10

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Service for the Lord's Day

So, this may be a bad way to begin a sermon, as I think I am about to offend the majority of you. I'm not really a pet person. Not a dog person. Not a cat person. And I'll go ahead and throw my husband Jay under the bus. Neither is he. We like people! We like y'all a whole lot! Just not pets. Martha Glenn is a pet lover, she would prefer things were different at our house, but they won't be. Don't try to start some sort of campaign on her behalf. Someday she'll live on her own and she have as many pets as she likes! I just hope she won't ask us to keep them when she goes out of town.

My brother and his wife, and my Dad, they like dogs. And the other day one or the other of them posted something on Facebook. It was an image of a dog and its boy, or its man, really, sitting and looking out over a beautiful lake. Both the dog and the man have thought bubbles over their heads. The man's thought bubble is full of things like money and cars and a bigger house and such. The dog's thought bubble is a picture of the man and the dog sitting and looking out over the lake. You get the point. The dog is happier, because he is content, he is living in the moment. He's not unsatisfied with his life.

And of course, there's some truth to that. But it got me thinking. Sure, I guess if all your aspirations are about money and material success, that's going to leave you with nothing but a lack of contentment. But there is something to be said for the yearning for more that is part of what it is to be human. There is something to be said for the desire for what we don't yet have, for the desire for things that don't even exist, in fact.

Recently, I watched an interview with Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creator of the Broadway musical "Hamilton." (We are all about "Hamilton" in our household.) In the interview, Miranda was quoted as saying that part of his creative process involves asking himself the question: "What's the thing that's not in the world that should be in the world?"¹ This is the kind of question asked by artists. By inventors and engineers who solve problems. It is the kind of question asked by humans, not by dogs. This notion of human creativity is just one possible way of understanding the way that we are created in the image of God. God is the Creator of everything, in the largest sense. And we are images of God in that we, too, are creative beings.

There are lots of theological debates about what exactly it means to be created in the image of God, and we don't have to get into why there are better and worse reasons to consider some of those things right now, but among the possible descriptions are: we are creative, we are rational, we are caretakers or stewards (this is what dominion means, by the way—not domination), we are future-focused, we are story-tellers, we have a spiritual nature, we have a sense of justice and righteousness, we are self-determining and self-transcending (meaning we can think about what we are thinking). But I think that one of the most important possibilities is that we are relational. We are designed to be in relationship with God and with one another.

If you think back a little over a month now to Ken's sermon on the Trinity, he talked a little bit about who God is, as God in community. A God who is 3-in-1 is a God who exists in a relationship of love even in God's own self—and then that relationship of love pours out into all of creation, and

¹ This quote comes from a PBS News Hour interview with Lin Manuel Miranda. You can see that interview on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAIeVjW-GNA>.

specifically into God's relationship with humanity. God is God in relationship. To be created in the image of God means to be created as those who are designed to be in relationship. We are made to be in relationship to the God who loves us. And we are made to be in relationship to one another.

Now, it must be said as we talk about our creation in the image of God that this is not intended as some song of praise to the triumph of the human spirit. We are not perfect beings. I think we know that. The image of God in each of us is deeply affected by sin. Next week, we'll talk about how we are all sinners, so that will be great! I'm sure you all can't wait to hear about that! But even despite our sin, the image of God in us is not unrecognizable. We can recognize the image of God in those around us, so that we can live out the image of God in us—to be relational human beings, relating to other human beings, who also bear the image of God. We do that as we live together in community. Today, we come to the Table, and as we share one loaf and one cup, we celebrate that unity, the shared unity of the body of Christ.

Easy enough.

Or is it.

Well, it's pretty easy to affirm the image of God in those we love, anyway. But then, we read the Epistle of James, and if we take it seriously we might just realize that we have a problem. James reminds us that we aren't always so consistent with how we respond to God and how we respond to those created in God's image. We're probably familiar with the words James uses about finding that the tongue is difficult to tame—and I don't think many of us would disagree with that. I think many of us find ourselves saying things we wish we hadn't. But apropos for us today is that James says that we use the same mouth to bless God, and to curse those who are made in God's likeness.

Let me say a little something about how the ancients understood blessing and cursing. Their understanding was a little bit more of what we might think of as “magical thinking”—but I think that it might actually be more accurate than we know. In the ancient world, the idea of blessing or cursing someone would imply that something would actually happen as a result of the words spoken. That someone's fortunes and status would actually change as a result of the cursing.² Very different from the idea that “sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me.” Very different than the idea that we can say whatever we want about people as long as they don't hear it, or as long as we have the anonymity of the internet, or as long as we say it in groups that won't be offended by our speech. But perhaps the ancients had it right, that words have more power than that.

See, it's easy for us to see those we love, or those who are like us as those who are made in the image of God. But then there are those groups of people who it becomes difficult for us to love. Think about it. We all have them. During this election season, maybe it's the Democrats. Maybe it's the Republicans. And then what happens is the way we talk about them just makes it even more difficult for us to see the image of God in them. We use the same mouth to bless God and to curse those who are made in God's likeness.

So who is it for you? Dog people? Cat people? This assigning of labels and judgments to a group of people. Once we give an entire group of people a name...conservatives, liberals, Republicans, Democrats...we can stop treating them individuals with feelings and families and real stories and begin treating them as a group caricature of sorts. And then it becomes very easy to make fun of them, to distort who they are, to treat them with disdain. To curse them, if you want to use James' language. And then, this is where the ancients probably had it right. These words we use do have power. These labels are used as weapons. Us vs. them. These images function so powerfully that there is a “visceral

² “To use an imprecatory *curse* on someone, stemming as it did from an ancient perlocutionary understanding of how language works, both labels a person socially but also renders that person's standing before God as one condemned.” See Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 293.

sense of disgust” that comes with them. They keep us separated from one another. They can even breed violence. Justify all kinds of hostility.

There are all kinds of groups we form images of with our labels: Evangelicals. Progressives. Feminists. Old white males. Helicopter parents. Millennials. Thugs. Mean girls. Police Officers. Public school teachers. Muslims. Politicians. Which labels do you hold onto and form an immediate image and judgment about? Which operate in your daily life? We all have them. The question is, can we identify them honestly to ourselves?³

If we think about the people that are most difficult for us to imagine are created in the image of God, well, these people are created in the image of God, too.

Of course, the image of God in us is marred by sin. But you and I aren’t asked to value one another according to our sin—thanks be to God. We value people because of the value God gives to each of us.

And so let’s return for a moment to the beginning. To our text from Genesis, chapter 1. One thing that it is worth noticing is that when God creates human beings, humanity is the only part of creation God talks to.⁴ And that points us back to the relationship that God has intended for us to be in. Human beings are beings of words, people who communicate. Communication is how we are in relationship with God (remember last week you talked about prayer—communication with God—see how this is all starting to come together) and communication is how we are in relationship with one another. It matters what words we use when we speak to and about one another.

As those created in the image of God, we are designed to be in relationship with God, and with all those who are also created in the image of God. And this means, ultimately, with everyone. Which is why Jesus is able to say that the Greatest Commandments are like each other, are similar to each other—loving God and loving neighbor. And it is why Jesus says we are to love our enemies—not insult, not threaten, not even just pretend they don’t exist. But love them.

Because when we are not in relationship with one another, we are not living out the image of God in us. “The God who lives in relationship calls us to life in relationship.”⁵

Thanks be to the God in whose image we are created. May God grant us the grace to recognize that image in ourselves, in those around us, and in all people.

Amen.

³ Theresa Latini gives a helpful series of talks at the March 2016 NEXTChurch Conference, “Enemy Images and Nonviolent Communication” in Atlanta, GA. I have borrowed much of this information from her. You can view them here: <http://nextchurch.net/2016-national-gathering-theresa-latini/>

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation*, p. 31.

⁵ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Second Edition, p. 144.