

In the Image: “And It was Very Good”

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

Sunday, May 27

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

My grandfather, Herman Maggard, had bright red hair. 5 of his 7 siblings had red hair, too, but by the time I knew them, all their hair was white. The red hair actually skipped a generation in the family – until I was born. The nurse came out and told my dad, you have a beautiful baby girl, but she has this red fuzzy stuff on her head, and we’re not quite sure what it is. But don’t worry - we’re going to try everything we can to wash it out. She came back a few minutes later and said – Mr. Birdwhistell, we’re not sure what to do – no matter what we do, it just keeps getting redder. Thankfully, my family loved me anyway, red fuzz and all.

My mother, Martha Birdwhistell, has light blue sclera, meaning the whites of her eyes are actually light blue. The doctor pointed it out during an eye exam when she was a little girl and asked if she had ever broken any bones. She hadn’t, and she thought it was such an odd question for him to ask. She didn’t think about it again until I was born, I had light blue sclera, and just a few months later I started breaking bones. My parents later learned that light blue sclera is one of the symptoms of Osteogenesis Imperfecta – the genetic bone disease that I have, that I inherited from my mom.

My dad and I also share what we like to call the Birdwhistell nose. (I look more like my cousin Cory than anyone else, and she was blessed with the Birdwhistell nose, too). But my body is shaped a lot like my mother’s, and I think we have similar facial expressions, too.

These are some of the ways that I carry on some of the physical characteristics of my family, but there are so many other things I have received from my family besides red hair, blue sclera, and the Birdwhistell nose.

For instance, my dad loves to make to-do lists, and so do I. Every Saturday morning when I was growing up, he and I would sit at the kitchen table and make our to-do lists together. Nothing gave him or me greater satisfaction than checking things off of our lists.

Or, sometimes, I’ll catch myself saying something, and I’ll think to myself – I sound exactly like my mother. Or I can’t find my keys, and I think back on all those times I got so irritated with her because she couldn’t find her keys either.

My dad and I also share a common love of photography. Every time I’m at our farm in Kentucky, around sunset time, we both make our way outside to take pictures of the sun setting over the pond. Over the years, Dad taught me how to take the best pictures, or how to get the best angles and lighting, and I know I get my love for beautiful scenery from him. Now, I have a wall at my house of all the sunset and sunrise pictures I’ve taken at the farm in honor of him.

And of course, you know I’m going to mention Kentucky basketball. I grew up going to games and sitting on my parents’ and grandparents’ laps in Rupp Arena. I know you all make fun of me for my love of Kentucky basketball, but it goes so far beyond loyalty to a sports team. It’s a love that has been passed on to me from my family – in the same way that many of our children are growing up tailgating with us at Baylor games, or cheering with us for the Lady Bears.

And one of the most important things my family has passed down to me is deep love for and commitment to the church. My dad has been a deacon and a Sunday School director. My mom has always enjoyed teaching children and serving in missions. My uncle Jack was a campus minister and religion professor. All of my

grandparents were deeply invested in the church, too. Being engaged in the community of faith has always been incredibly important to my family.

In so many ways, and in more that I'm sure I'm not even aware of – I bear the image of my family. Part of their legacy lives on within me. I was created in their likeness. The things that they care about, or are interested in, or passionate about – are also evident within me. There are parts of me that are so uniquely distinct to my family that I will always carry with me into the world.

Then there's my brother, Matt. We both come from the same parents. And yet he and I are probably as different as night and day. You would never even look at us and think we are related – he looks like my mom's side of the family, and I look like my dad's. (He wasn't blessed with the Birdwhistell nose). We think differently about the world. We vote differently. We have different priorities.

And yet, my brother is still one of my favorite people in the world. He is an incredible father. A loving husband. A faithful friend. He looks just like my uncle Joe Taylor – people are always astonished when they see pictures of them at the same age. Matt is a beloved doctor in his community – he and my dad share a common commitment to health care. And each day after work, he immediately comes home and takes the kids outside to work with him in his garden – a love that he and my mother share. Our family text message thread is often filled with pictures of Mom and Matt's latest crops. Sometimes I like to send them pictures of all the produce that's available to me at HEB.

Matt and I are so different, and yet he bears the image of our family, too. He was created in their likeness. Part of their legacy lives on within him. The things that they care about, or are interested in, or passionate about – are also evident within him. There are parts of him that are so uniquely distinct to my family that he will always carry with him into the world, too.

And the same is true about us as the family of God, isn't it? Today's text tells us that we each bear the image of God. We were created in God's likeness. The things that God cares about, or is interested in, or passionate about – are also evident within us. And there are parts of us that are so uniquely distinct to the image of God that we will always carry with us into the world.

Today's text begins in Genesis 1:24, on the sixth day of creation. For the previous five days of creation, God has been busy making all kinds of things: stars in the sky, light in the darkness, and every kind of plant imaginable. And then God begins to make living creatures, like birds and fish, cattle, creeping things, it says, and wild animals. (Although why did God have to create creeping things? Couldn't we have done without some of those?) And if God made wild animals, it must mean that God even created the armadillos that have been tearing up my yard this month. And yet, God saw all the animals he had made, and said that it was all good.

Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. And so God created humans. And God saw everything that he had made that day, and indeed, God said, it was very good.

But what does it really mean that you and I were created in the image of God? What difference does it make to us today – so many years after this text was originally written?

In order to understand this, it's helpful for us to understand the religious landscape of the time this text was written. Many other religions at the time were putting the image of God on to statues of stone or of bronze. However, the earliest followers of God felt that this was idolatrous, and they followed the commandment given to them by God through Moses: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of

anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath....You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I am the Lord your God.” Because of this, the people of Israel resisted every effort to make an image for God.

Which is why today’s text would have been completely counter-cultural to its original readers. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says it, “Our text makes a surprising counter-assertion [and says that] there is one way in which God is imaged in the world and only one: humanness. This is the only creature, the only part of creation, which discloses to us something about the reality of God. This God is not known through any cast or molten image. God is known peculiarly through this creature who exists in the realm of history...God is not imaged in anything fixed but in the freedom of human persons to be faithful and gracious.”

I don’t know about you, but when I stop to think about it, I am completely overwhelmed by this. I mean, it would have made sense if God had put God’s image in the sunset over the pond at my parents’ farm – that’s certainly a place where I experience God. Or in the vastness of the Grand Canyon. In the ebb and flow of the ocean. Or even in the twinkling cascade of stars in the sky. And while God created all of this – and calls all of it good – God didn’t choose to put God’s image within it. Of all the grand and powerful and beautiful places in which God could have chosen to put God’s image, God chose to put God’s image within humanity. Within us.

We were each created with thoughtfulness and creativity and intentionality, and we each bear God’s divine imprint within us. Something deep within all of us helps to reflect the image of God in the world.

Fred Craddock told a beautiful sermon once in which he proposed – what would it be like if God had not done this - if God has not created humankind in God’s image? Then humans would be no different than animals. We would spend our lives eating and drinking and working (possibly) or showing off and doing tricks (possibly), and reproducing, and then at some point, we would die. But instead, God chose to form humankind in his image.

And as Craddock writes, “God said ... I am proud of the squirrel, I love the elephant, the horse is good, the mule is nice, and I do like these llamas, but the one that is exactly like me is this one. I have breathed in this one my own life.” And he goes on to say, “This is why human beings are not content, if they are real human beings, with just eating and drinking and working and showing off and bragging and dying. Real human beings long for God, search the heavens, write poetry, play music, spread art all over the world, and think the things of God.”

And, this is me speaking now, perhaps whenever we do get stuck in the rut of eating and drinking and working and sleeping – we’re not fulling living into all that God has created us to do and all that God has created us to be.

In his book, *Christ of the Celts*, John Phillip Newell explains that the image of God within us is like garments. He explains that in the nineteenth century, royal garments were woven throughout with an expensive gold. And if somehow the golden thread were taken out of the garment, the whole garment would unravel. “So it is,” he said,” with the image of God woven into the fabric of our being. If it were taken out of us, we would unravel. We would cease to be. So the image of God is not simply a characteristic of who we are...The image of God is the essence of our being...”

So- what difference should it make that you and I were created in the image of God – that the image of God is at the essence of our being?

It means that no matter where we are or where we go,

No matter what we look like or what we wish we looked like,
It means no matter what our education is, or if we finished school,
what our job is, or if we even have a job,
Whether we are male or female,
Whether we are 2 or 22 or 102,
Whether we feel like you have a lot of friends or we are incredibly lonely
Whether we are confident walking into a room of people we don't know or
whether we want to crawl under the table and hide,
Whether we love who we are or whether we have trouble loving who God created us to be
We each carry within us, at our very core, a piece of who God is.

And perhaps the parts of us that we wish we could change are actually beautiful parts of the image of God within us.

This may sound simple, but the reality is that this is one of the most difficult spiritual lessons we can ever learn and truly come to embrace. Next week, Jon Singletary will preach about our calling to see other people as created in the image of God. But we can't even begin to do that if we can't stop and see the image of God within ourselves.

Sometimes, I think that those of us who treat other people the worst are often those of us who can't even begin to see the good within ourselves, so we act out, trying to find acceptance and purpose and affirmation and meaning in so many other places – when the reality is that God has placed that within us all along – because we were created in the image of God.

Of course, while you and I were created in the image of God, we are always going to fall short of living as God created us to live and being who God created us to be. It's why God knew we needed a physical, literal, in-person, living-in-the flesh image of God, through Jesus, to show us the way. Colossians 1:15 calls Jesus, "the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation." Walter Bouzard writes that "Jesus is *the* human being as God intended all human beings to be "in the beginning," a perfect representation of God to the [world]." And so if we want to know how to carry God's image with us into the world – and into our day to day lives – we look to the example of Jesus. Living in the image of God goes hand in hand with living in the way of Jesus.

I'd like to close by reading you part of a new children's book, *When God Made You*, by William Paul Turner – which I think creatively and exquisitely captures this idea of being created in God's image. And I don't share these words with you because they're cute and sing-songy, although that's certainly true. I share these words with you because I think we adults sometimes have trouble believing them. Sure, we can believe them about the children we often read stories to. But can we stop and believe them about ourselves, too? Hear these words, and perhaps you will begin to believe them today, too, that of all the places where God could have chosen to put God's image – God chose to put it within you:

*"You, you, when God made YOU,
God made you all shiny and new
An incredible you, a you all your own
A you unlike anyone else ever known.*

*An exclusive design, one God refined,
You're a perfectly crafted one of a kind.
'Cause when God made you,*

*Somehow God knew
That the world needed someone exactly like you.*

*You, you, God thinks about you.
God was thinking of you long before your debut.
From the very beginning, amid history and time,
You, little one, never left God's mind.*

*Out of billions of faces from cultures, all races,
People God made, from all different places,
God knew your name. Your picture was framed.
God's family without you would not be the same.*

*'Cause when God made you, this much is true,
The world got to meet who God already knew.
You, you, when God sees you,
God delights in what is and sees only what's true.
That you – yes, YOU – in all of your glory,
Bring color and rhythm and rhyme to God's story.*

*So be you – fully you – a show stopping review.
Live your life in full color, every tint, every hue.
Discover. Explore! Have faith but love more.
And learn and relearn all that God made you for.
Use your talents and passion, those gifts that God fashioned.
Think up ideas and then put them in action.*

*When you dance all alone, spinning like a cyclone,
Being whoever, whatever, in a world all your own,
God smiles and here's why – in the spark in your eye,
A familiar reflection shines bright from inside.
'Cause when God made you and the world oohed and aahed,
In heaven they called you an image of God."*