

The Image of God Shining Through

Gen 1:26-31

Colossians 1:15-20

We gather each week hoping for a glimpse of God, hoping to see the face of God in some new and meaningful way.

Instead we see each other. What a ripoff.

Well, maybe that's not true. And if it is, perhaps it's because we don't see God in each other, particularly when we can't recognize the image of God in ourselves. The Image of God is in us. And, moreover, the image of God shines through us.

-- Friends, I wanted to start today with a story about Uncle Jack, the one where he's walking through the Kentucky farm quoting Frederick Buechner; however, Mary Alice's story of how she reflects the images of her family struck a cord with me. And yet, as with God's image, I believe the image of our families aren't simply reflected in who we are, they shine through us. They flow through us.

In my kitchen, you won't just see that I cook haphazardly like my mother did, with a little bit of this and a little bit of that (lagniappe style, for you Cajuns/Carolyn). You will also get a taste of my mom and grandmother through my own creative cooking when you come over for gumbo.

The image of my dad shines through when I'm road raging down the highway. And Haden learned that a little bit of me shines through him when he got pulled over last week. My dad's faith isn't only reflected in me and my siblings; it flows through us as we make it our own, which is how he taught us it should be.

You can see a picture of my grandfather in my physical appearance, but he shines through me and my impatience when I'm cleaning the house, picking up after the kids. And at the same time, the utter patience and peace I experience when I'm outside in the garden is him shining through me.

The faith of My uncle Wade and my uncle Rodney shine through my belief in recovery and redemption, hope and grace. My mother's brothers are pictures of Christlike faithfulness that I try my best to let shine through me.

Likewise, the image of God is not simply in us. And it is not simply a reflection. It shines through us. I'm talking here about the difference between reflection and refraction.

Light reflects directly back to its source, but when light is refracted there is a shift in direction. Light is refracted when it enters a surface, and passing through, it changes speed and direction. (Gerry, did I get that close?)

Perhaps we reflect the image of God; we hear that a lot. But perhaps we refract it. Perhaps the image of God is not reflected back to God or others, but rather *refracted* through us so that we each live out the image and likeness of God, each of us in a unique way. Perhaps it is refracted in innumerable ways through us as we connect with one another. As we seek to love one another.

Jesus refracted the image of God in all that he did. The writer of Colossians quotes an ancient hymn about Jesus bearing the image of God. The creative love of God we see in Genesis is the same creative love lived out in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection and it is this image shining through all of creation, just as it shines through the firstborn of all creation, the one in whom all things were created. Paul calls Jesus God's true image and says he makes God's light and life visible through us.

-- How are we to understand how the light shines through us? How do we refract the image of God? It requires moving from what we see of God in ourselves, which is important, to how we see God moving through us as we make our way in the world. The image of God shines in different ways as we each refract God's creative love into the world.

Created to create is a part of the theme Mary Alice shared that we will also hear from the children next week. A core characteristic of God that we see in Genesis 1 is God's creative love. We are created with that image moving through us, and here we read about two aspects of what this love means. They are having dominion in the earth in vv. 26 and 28 and being in community with one another in vv. 27.

Catholic teachings, particularly after the Second Vatican Council, emphasized the meaning of the image of God in Genesis in this way naming these two themes a call to stewardship and a call to communion.

Stewardship is a reference to having dominion. In being good stewards, we hear the function of the image of God within us; this function is a call to responsibility for living out the image of God's creative love. God creates and we are called to create. God demonstrates creative love and we are created to express creative acts of love.

The second theme, Communion, or community, or relationship, is the structure where the image of God is most clear. The Genesis reference is to male and female, but the interpretations almost always reference a call to value relationship in its many forms.

In the Catholic teachings, as in the Genesis text, it becomes clear that we are created to live in relationship with one another and with responsibility for each other. And that each of these is an expression of the creative love that is at the core of who God is and who we are. And yet, these principles have been twisted, and a hierarchy of the created order became a dominant view in the church – a view where God is over Jesus and Jesus is over men and men are over women, where Anglo-Saxon men and women were to have dominion over people of color. As absurd as it may sound, it is a theology that has played itself out over and over again throughout our history.

Womanist theologian and Episcopal Priest Kelly Brown Douglas addresses it head on, describing our discriminatory 'welfare reform,' Jim Crow style drug crackdowns, and racialized policing that continue to marginalize and oppress our black population in America – She describes her fear for the life of her own black son given the repeated deaths of black young men, including Jordan Edwards, Alton Sterling, Akiel Denkins, Gregory Gunn, Samuel Debose, Freddie Gray, Brendon Glenn, Walter Scott, Christian Taylor, Michael Brown, Jr., Ezell Ford, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Philando Castile, Joseph Mann, Laquan MacDonald, Tamir Rice, Jamar Clark, Travon Martin, Samuel Debose, Jonathan Sanders, and Stephon Clark, only to name some of the young men in high profile cases.

The fears she experiences daily as a black woman are fears I never face from my place of privilege as a white male. Ultimately, our culture embodies what author Lisa Sharon Harper calls "the lie" of American culture, that "black people are not fully human. In most crass terms — they are seen as animals," she writes.

German Lutheran and feminist theologian Dorothee Solle writes: “We are responsible for the house we did not build but occupy.” I did not build the house of American racism, or sexism, but I reside in it, I benefit from it, and I experience the comfort of its power, privilege, and position.

Meaningful relationships that recognize the image of God in everyone have not been at the core of our experience and we have little sense of responsibility for our brothers&sisters and we sigh and we shrug and we don’t know what to do.

-- The worth of each human being, the centrality of human relationships, the need for global responsibility and care – these are central to our faith, but they are also core values of the profession of social work and what we teach in social work education, which as you know is a part-time job I have at Baylor when I’m not parenting 5 adolescents living in my house.

A distinctive of learning in the Garland School is what we call the ethical integration of faith and social work practice. We teach this from 3 perspectives.

1. *What does faith mean in your own life?* We want to nurture a sense of vocation in our students, a critical understanding of how social work is a calling to serve others and work for justice.
2. *What does faith mean in your organization or community?* We teach our students to understand the role of faith in their culture and context, in their organizations, and in our policies.
3. *What does faith mean in the lives of the individuals and families with whom we work?* We want our students to understand the role of faith in the lives of the people they serve – how might religion and

spirituality be a resource, an asset in the life of an individual or a family, and how might it also have hindered relationships and opportunities in a person’s life. The church has been a source of pain in the lives of too many people, but for others it can also be a source of healing.

One of my colleagues, Holly Oxhandler, studies this intersection of faith and practice and describes it using the Buddhist/Hindu notion of *Namaste*: The divine in me sees the divine in you. When I am open to the presence of God in my life, then I can be more open to seeing the presence of God flow through yours.

These social work teachings of ours are consistent with our professional values. The social work code of ethics prioritizes honoring the dignity and worth of each human being. It stops short of recognizing each as the image of God, but the implication is as strong. From this, we are to value the importance of human relationships, to promote competence in caring for others, and the responsibility to work for justice in society.

I love our profession, our school and what we teach. However, what compels me is not that these characteristics are at the core of our profession or our school’s mission. I chose social work, or God chose me for it, because of my faith convictions. As much as I love social work, It is a belief in the power of God’s creative love and a recognition of that love within each of us that shapes me most.

We are created with the love of God at the core of our identity.

We are created to let the love of God shine through our interactions with others.

-We are called to develop and foster relationships rooted in the love of God that is our nature.

-And, because the image of God is at the core of our identity, we are called to recognize it in others.

-There is something of God that is refracted through us in relationship, in community with others, and there is something of God in us that calls us to respond with care in living out the creative love that is our essence.

And yet, to be honest, many of us grow weary when people of faith mess this up the most, or seem the most likely to miss it; it is far too difficult to see these commitments made clear in the Church. We know that as people of faith we have not always lived out the richness of this teaching or the fullest expression of the creative love of God.

And so, when Solle teaches that we all bear the burden of responsibility and hear the call to right relationships, her words call me to pay attention to the house which I occupy.

When we proclaim all lives matter, but continually fail black lives, then we have to ask what more can we do to see the love of God in our brothers and sisters.

When 1500 children are separated from their parents crossing the border and new policies seek to blame the loss on immigrant parents, then we have to ask in new ways, how might God's creative love flow through us?

Likewise, when the US funds and equips paramilitary police officers to illegally execute gang members, we do not fully grasp the meaning of the image of God in our neighbors.

When women cry out "me too, me too" and men do not get the message, we have failed to hear the image of God our sisters are proclaiming. When corporate leaders respond

better to the outcry of women and people of color than church leaders, we are blind to the image of God that shines through them.

And when women cry out SBCtoo pointing out the ways our sister churches and Baptist institutions have hurt them, then we have even more work to do. This week Rev. George Mason of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas took on the Southern Baptists, asking how long they will affirm the root of male authority and female submission, when the fruit of that theology is showing itself to be rotten over and over again. And as his Associate Pastor, Mark Wingfield, wrote the next day, "It is time for the action of Christians to drown out the silence of the church."

-- We are a community doing our part to recognize fully the image of God in all people and to be mindful of our responsibility for the relationships we need to nurture. Like others of you, my home church and hometown hasn't always instilled this same message. I am mindful of the ways my heritage shaped me and how much work there is still to be done in overcoming it. I was born in a small town in southeast TX where racism was commonplace, where "A woman's place" was something men felt was theirs to discuss, and where calling people from Mexico "Mexicans" came with a hateful connotation.

We might have heard that the image of God shone through us, but we would too often see a different light shine in our community: and I remember seeing the hateful light of a burning cross lit in a local park. Of course, that light was utter darkness -- an image of the darkness of a culture that could not see the image of God in everyone.

“We are responsible for the house we did not build, but occupy.” I was raised with too many of the tools that helped build houses of hate.

However, I was also given the tools to dismantle these things. Even in Vidor, Tx, there were efforts to honor the image of God in everyone. I am grateful for the ways those lights shined brighter than the darkness that surrounded us. And now, here in this place, as a parent, as a leader, as a white male, I am mindful of the need for what Jesus provides as the firstborn of all creation, the one who was before all things and who holds all things together, the one who reminds us of the image of God within us and who reconciles us to God and each other. He expresses the richness of creation and the ways God is at work making peace in all things.

We have, in these passages, a story to tell of God’s creative love, refracted in our lives, shining through each of us. My prayer is that as we go from this place today, we might see the light of God’s creative love shine through each other in new ways.

May we see God shining through the cashier at the grocery store, the neighbor you hardly know, or the person across the sanctuary you have yet to meet. May you see God shining through your own life as well, and in new ways as you offer self-compassion and creative love with each person with whom you interact.

We gather each week hoping for a glimpse of God, hoping to see the face of God in some new and meaningful way. And so, as we see each other, may we see the image of God shining through. Amen.