

In This House We Believe...
Part 2 – Why Do Black Lives Matter?
Genesis 1:26-27

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 17, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humans 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.”

²⁷ So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27, NRSV)

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In 2012 George Zimmerman was acquitted in court in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. In response, three black organizers named Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created a black-centered political movement and building project they named Black Lives Matter. The movement grew nationally in 2014 after the deaths of Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York. Since then it has established itself as a global movement, particularly after the death of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis.¹

Today many people know something about the movement, and most people at least know the creed: “Black lives matter.” Among other places, it’s included on yard signs around our city. I doubt any of us in the church is indifferent to this creed, though I’m sure we all respond in different ways. For many black Christians, this creed represents what they think should be an obvious truth, and one which many are weary of having to declare. For some white Christians, it has been embraced as a rallying cry, a way to protest the racial injustice they see in our society. Others hear this creed as a personal attack that feels unwarranted and unfair, an accusation of racism towards people who believe they are not racist. And finally, some hear these words as the spearhead of a much larger political agenda, a wolf in sheep’s clothing that must be exposed.²

What’s your reaction? Do you find yourself having one of those responses when you hear people declare that black lives matter? Or maybe you have an altogether different response. Either way, I doubt your response is one of indifference.

When I set up this sermon series last week, inspired by this very popular yard sign, I told you that one of the things I want us to be committed to along the way is adherence to things of “first importance.” That’s how Paul introduces the creed he gives in 1st Corinthians 15, our passage from last week.³ Paul knew, as I hope we know, that when we start to get into matters of “second importance,” that’s when we get into trouble. Specifically, that’s when unhealthy division creeps in. I’m afraid we are about to watch this happen again this year in the church during this presidential election. Who we elect as President of the United States is important, but in the church it must never be a matter of first importance. In other words, we can still live in unity together as brothers and sisters in Christ and have different political views and support different political candidates. To quote Augustine again, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” Again, trouble comes when you move the non-essentials, things of secondary importance, into the position of essentials, things of first importance.

I’m going to try to model for you what this looks like this week as we explore this first creed, “Black lives matter.” For one thing, I’m not going to talk about my views of the organization which spawned this creed. That’s a very important discussion – please hear me say that - but it’s secondary to a more primary issue that I believe is at the heart of this creed, an issue which I hope you will agree is one of absolute first importance.

Whatever your response to this creed, I hope that you can at least hear and acknowledge in the voices of those who declare it this simple, but heartbreaking, plea: “My life matters!” Now, maybe you are somebody who wants to respond defensively, “Of course it does. Nobody is saying that your life doesn’t matter. *I’m* certainly not saying that.” Let’s assume for a second

¹ To learn more visit Howard University School of Law online at <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM>

² Rebecca McLaughlin, *The Secular Creed* (The Gospel Coalition, 2021), 6-7.

³ 1st Corinthians 15:3 – “For I handed on to you as of first importance...”

that you are right, that there is actually nothing in our society that should make black Americans feel this way. I don't believe that's true, but for the sake of argument, let's just imagine it is true. Even then, should we not be concerned, even *heartbreakingly* concerned, when we here anybody come to a place where they feel as if they need to declare that their life matters? I for one don't believe that most people who declare this creed are saying, "Black lives matter *more*", but rather, "Black lives matter *also*." That means that if we respond with the qualifier, "All lives matter", we miss the point. Worse, we miss the pain. Doesn't it break your heart that anybody would feel the need to remind others that their life matters?

Whether or not those who declare this creed acknowledge this or not, the pain comes from what the framers of our own Declaration of Independence called a "self-evident truth" that is at the very heart of God's Word, that all people are created equal because all people are created in the very image of God. This is why a black life, along with every human life, matters. Again, as Genesis 1:27 puts it, "**So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.**"⁴ The Hebrew word here translated "image" literally means "to shade", and can refer to an illusion, resemblance or representation.⁵ The image of a shadow can be helpful here. When the sun casts a shadow of my person, the shadow doesn't resemble an elephant or an oak tree. It resembles me. It's not me, of course, but distinct from me. But if all you had of me was my shadow, you could tell something about me. It reflects me and represents me in some faithful way.

The Bible is clear that nothing else in all of creation is made in God's image. Only human beings. This means that it was God's intention from the outset that we are his shadow in this world, that we distinctly represent and reflect him in and to the world. In biblical language, our lives are meant to bring glory to God. We are not divine ourselves, any more than my shadow is the same as me. But we reflect divinity, or are meant to reflect divinity. There is lots of debate about what this says about us, about which parts of humanity reflect our Creator. Is it our conscience, our soul, our morality, our ability to reason, our capacity for fellowship, the fact that we can love? The text actually doesn't tell us. The best hint we find here is in the following verses where God commands the man and woman to be fruitful and multiply, and then have dominion over the rest of creation, to cooperate with

God in the cultivation and care of the world. Whatever it means in the end, however, this much is true, that all humans are made in the very image of God.

Understand that this idea, that humans are made or formed in the image of God, is not unique to the biblical witness. In other ancient societies, people believed that royalty, or other high-ranking officials, were in the "image of God."⁶ What is unique, absolutely unique, about the creation story in Genesis, is that this designation is not reserved only for certain people or special people, but that *all* people, ditch-diggers as well as kings and queens, are made in the image of God. C.S. Lewis once put it this way in his essay, *The Weight of Glory*, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."⁷

This declaration is absolutely unique to the Judeo-Christian understanding, meaning that anybody who assumes this self-evident truth, that all people have unique and infinite worth simply because they are human beings, is, whether they agree with it or not, agreeing with at least this part of the Bible. As I mentioned last week, secular culture, which rests on the evolutionary idea that the strong devouring the weak is simply the way things naturally work in our world, cannot with integrity then promote ideas of human justice without borrowing from biblical truth. If the strong devouring the weak is simply the way of the world, the way things are meant to work, then what leg do you have to stand on to say that all lives matter? If the strong devouring the weak is the way of the world, you can't even protest something as horrendous as slavery! It's just nature.

The Genesis creation story, along with what follows in the rest of scripture, elevates the worth and beauty of all humanity more than any other creed or belief system does. Think of it this way. What would you say is the most beautiful part of God's creation from God's perspective? When God looks at his creation, what does he consider to be the most beautiful? The brilliance of the sun setting over the ocean? The grandeur of mountains which seem to touch the sky? The beauty and power of the animal kingdom? The intricate splendor of even one single flower? While our Creator loves and cherishes all of his creation, I believe

⁴ This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁵ <https://studybible.info/strongs/H6754>

⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* (Eerdmans, 1997), 135.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, preached originally as a sermon in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on June 8, 1942; published in THEOLOGY, November, 1941, and by the S.P.C.K, 1942. Read online at <https://www.wheelersburg.net/Downloads/Lewis%20Glory.pdf>

that what God finds most precious, most valuable, most beautiful, is people. It's with this in mind that Tim Keller once declared, "Cities, quite literally, have more of the image of God per square inch than any other place on earth."⁸ If that is true, as I believe it is, that means that God finds a crowded sidewalk in the middle of New York City more beautiful than anything else nature has to offer. And if that's God's perspective, perhaps it should be ours as well, regardless of what sorts of people are on that sidewalk.

With this in mind, when God tells us that as people made in his image, we are to cooperate with him in cultivating and caring for his creation as stewards, this does not give us a mandate to engage with creation in a coercive, tyrannical, exploitive or abusive way. A steward does not own what he or she stewards, but cares for it as the rightful owner would care for it. God, who is love and so naturally loves all his creation, therefore charges us to "dominate" his creation as a good shepherd would "dominate" sheep placed in his care. Such a shepherd cares for, tends, feeds, and protects his sheep, even lays down his life for his sheep.⁹ This is a helpful way to think about how we are called to engage with creation, especially the most beautiful and precious part of creation, which is one another. I love how Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts this when he writes, "[God] did not give [another person] to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator."¹⁰ Do you believe this? Do you believe that every person you ever meet – and I mean *every* person – is in some way meant to be a shadow that reflects the Lord in some beautiful way? If you do, it will radically change the way you approach and treat those around you in this world, regardless of how they treat you.

This takes us back to the pain we ought share when we hear people declare "Black lives matter" as a way of declaring "My life matters!". It also ought to take us back to the history that got us to this place. In August 1619, when a ship called the White Lion sailed into Point Comfort, Virginia, the first African slaves arrived on our soil. 350 captured Africans began the journey from present-day Angola. Only 19 survived the journey.¹¹ But hundreds of thousands would follow. This is history. This is *our* history.

Remember, this is a country which, heavily influenced by the teachings of the Christian gospel, included in its very Declaration of Independence the self-evident truth

that "all men [all people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It begs the obvious question: How could this same country then embrace the practice of enslaving a whole population of people? How was it possible to maintain both the vile institution of slavery for 250 years, and then even after it was abolished spend another 100 years embracing Jim Crow laws and other forms of overt and legal discrimination which were rooted in the same evil justification, *and at the same time* maintain the belief that all humans are equally created with the right to flourish?¹²

The only way it was possible to do this was to declare and to believe what other ancient cultures have long believed, specifically that some people are not made in God's image quite like other people. This was and is some people taking their God-given dominion and using it precisely contrary to the way it was meant to be used. And before I point the finger at others, I need to do a careful and honest examination of my own heart and motives. Perhaps I have not done this with my black neighbors in this world, but does that mean that I have always acted as the good shepherd of the *all* the people around me?

You see, it's not only black Americans who have become so desperate that they adopted as their creed, "My life matters!", but many others in this world. In places where women have been diminished in worth and beauty, they essentially declare, "Female lives matter!". In cultures like ours where the lives of the elderly are regularly dishonored, people cry out, "Old lives matter!" In other places, "Young lives matter! Asian lives matter! Brown lives matter! Incarcerated lives matter! Republican lives matter! Democratic lives matter! Jewish lives matter! Palestinian lives matter! Immigrant lives matter! Disabled lives matter!"

I have never, by the way, felt the need to declare, "White lives matter!", because I have lived in a culture that has always affirmed that truth from the beginning. Though, admittedly, there are places in this world where people with my skin color have been treated less-than-human, that's not been my experience. I hope that never means that I can't find myself moved by compassion by those around me who have felt the need to remind others and themselves, "My life matters!"

⁸ Source unknown

⁹ I'm borrowing this image from Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation Commentary: Genesis* (John Knox Press, 1982), 32. Of course, Jesus also employs this image for himself in John 10:1-21, and elsewhere.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper, 1954), 93.

¹¹ <https://www.history.com/news/american-slavery-before-jamestown-1619>

¹² I'm borrowing from myself here in a past sermon entitled, "Race & Justice: Part 1 - Whose Lives Matter?", preached at Faith Presbyterian Church of Sacramento on September 6, 2020.

Can we each have the humility to allow the Lord to show us how each of us has in some way dehumanized others in this world? Maybe you are one of those rare people who has no racial bias whatsoever, who never looks down on another person because of the color of their skin or the nature of their ethnic heritage. That's wonderful. But even though you may not be a racist, do you ever look down on racists, seeing yourself then as somehow superior? If so, do you not, in a way, do the very same thing? Those who truly understand that we all are of equal worth in God's eyes because he has put his image in us and on us, cannot do this. Furthermore, followers of Jesus who understand the gospel, that we are saved by sheer and unmerited grace ourselves, and not by our own righteousness, have extra motivation to avoid looking down on any other person. And aren't I right in saying that all of us, in some way or another, fail to do this?

The problem, of course, is that the image of God in each of us, which is meant to perfectly reflect the one who created us, is severely tarnished by sin, by our refusal to give glory to God and insistence on trying to steal glory for ourselves. French theologian, Henri Bocher, puts it this way, "We must state both that after his revolt mankind remains mankind, and also that mankind has radically changed, that he is but a grisly shadow of himself. Mankind remains the image of God, inviolable and responsible, but has become a contradictory image, one might say a caricature, a witness against himself."¹³ In other words, we all still bear the image of God, but that image has been severely corrupted by sin. A good illustration of the image of God as it now exists in all of us is a car windshield which has been shattered. The glass itself is still there, but it is so damaged that it will no longer function properly.¹⁴ As the image of God in us has been corrupted by sin, we are no longer able to reflect the perfect love of God we were meant to reflect in our relationships either to him, one another, or creation.

But out of his great love for us, and because as people made in his very image God considers us to be the most beautiful, precious part of his creation, he has moved to restore in us what had been lost. Long, long ago he chose a very imperfect and ordinary man named Abraham and made a sacred covenant with him, that he would bless and expand his family and that, through his family he would eventually bless all families, all black, brown and white families, on the earth.¹⁵ That covenant came to fruition when God himself came to earth in the person of his Son, Jesus, and became one of

us. In the person of Jesus Christ the world saw at last what a human being looks like when that human being is perfectly and beautifully reflecting the image of God. In Jesus we not only see what God is like, we also see what humanity is *supposed* to be like. Paul says of Christ in Colossians 1:15, "**He is the image of the invisible God...**"¹⁶ Jesus once even declared about himself, "**I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.**"¹⁷ He cares for creation, especially for God's most precious part of creation, as we were all meant to care for creation.

But understand that Jesus did not come only to *model the image of God for us*, but to *restore the image of God in us*. In his life he modeled this for us, in his insistence on loving not only some people, but all people, as he loved himself. In his death and resurrection, he then brought the forgiveness and grace of God in such a way that those of us who trust and follow him can begin to see him restore in us what has been lost. As Paul writes in 2nd Corinthians 3:18, "**And all of us...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.**" Those who are in Christ are finding that he is, by grace and by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit within us, incrementally restoring the image of God in us so that we might better and better resemble him in this world for his glory.

This is, by the way, something that Christ is doing in us not only as individuals, but even more so collectively, as the community of the church. In the creation account it is not insignificant that we are told that God created us in his image, "**male and female he created [us].**" Initially, this makes clear that men alone do not adequately reflect the full image of God, not nearly as well as men and women together reflect the image of God. There is something that each gender offers that helps us better understand, and ultimately, better glorify our Creator. But it goes beyond that. I think it's biblically faithful to say that this is true of ethnicity as well. The diversity of humanity, not just gender, but ethnicity, age, personality, and so on, collectively gives a better picture of God than any one characteristic might, on its own, provide.

There is talk in our world that we should all be colorblind, that ideally we should look at one other and never see race or ethnicity. I reject this idea because the Bible rejects this idea. Though U2 is one of my favorite all-time bands, they promote this wrong-headed idea in

¹³ Cited by Richard Phillips, "Man as the Image of God", *The Gospel Coalition*. Read the full essay at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/man-as-the-image-of-god/>

¹⁴ Borrowed from Richard Phillips.

¹⁵ See Genesis 12:1-3

¹⁶ See also 2nd Corinthians 4:4, which declares, "**In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing clearly the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.**"

¹⁷ John 10:11

their popular song, *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*, when Bono sings, "I believe in the kingdom come. Then all the colors will bleed into one." No, that's not right. When the scriptures declare that in Christ, in the Kingdom of God, there is no Jew or Greek, they are insisting that a person's ethnicity does not *exclude* them from God's family.¹⁸ But we each bring these beautiful distinctions *into* God's family. That means that when Jesus returns and ushers in the fulfillment of God's kingdom, sets all things right again in the world, the colors aren't going to all bleed into one, but be highlighted in all their beauty and distinctiveness. Revelation 7:9 puts it this way,

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

This is why we have chosen as one our 'yard signs' this verse from Jesus' teaching: "**Love one another as I have loved you.**"¹⁹ You may remember that in the very next verse Jesus declares, "**By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**"²⁰ So how will the world know that we are followers of Jesus? It is not primarily by our doctrine or moral stances, not by how we dress, not by the signs we put in our yards or the stickers we affix to our bumpers, certainly not by our politics. The world will know we trust and follow Jesus because we love one another, specifically because we love one another across all the other differences and distinctions that otherwise divide people in our world, and do so because we each recognize that every other person, regardless of all the ways they may be different from me, is a creature of infinite worth and beauty because he or she has been made in the very image of God.

There is, by the way, no other community in the world that is as diverse as the church. It's a group that includes at least as many Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians, as it does Europeans and North Americans, people from every culture and tribe, political progressives and conservatives of every stripe, women and men alike, all ages, all personalities, all walks of life. Maybe in America the 11:00 hour on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week – something we need to keep working on – but as a global community, there is no other religion, nation or

community in the history of the world which is as diverse as the Christian church, and it's not even close.²¹ The "yard sign" out front of this building reminds us of just how powerfully and persuasively we demonstrate the image of God in us when we love one another in spite of those differences because we believe that every life God creates and saves is one of infinite worth and beauty.

So at the roots of this creed, one often on the lips and yard signs of secular people who may say they want nothing to do with a God they don't acknowledge, is a self-evident truth that comes from the pages of scripture because it comes from the heart of God. Black lives matter because black lives are made, just as every human life is made, in the very image of God. How might we as the church allow our hearts to be broken when we hear any person, or any group of people, come to feel so degraded and dismissed that they feel the need to declare as their creed, "My life matters!" And then how might we allow our creed, that every human being is of infinite worth and beauty because he or she was made in the image of God, how might we allow that creed lead us then to act in this world in such a way that someday nobody ever again feels the need to remind anybody else that, "My life matters!"?

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage from Genesis 1:26-27 again? Since it's likely very familiar to you, slow it down and try to notice something here you haven't noticed before. What do you notice?
2. What is your initial response when you here the creed: "Black Lives Matter"? This is not a time to question or challenge the responses of others, but rather to listen for understanding.
3. Has there ever been a time in your life when you wanted to tell people, or even tell yourself, "My life matters!" How did you get to that point?

¹⁸ See, for instance, Galatians 3:28 – "**There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.**"

¹⁹ John 13:34

²⁰ John 13:35

²¹ Yale Law professor, Stephen L. Carter once said to those who disparage the church, "When you mock Christians, you're not mocking who you think you are." Cited by McLaughlin, 17.

4. What does it mean to you that human beings, uniquely among all of creation, are made in the image of God?
5. What makes it hard for us to remember that all people are of infinite worth and beauty because they are made in God's image? What makes it hard for *you* to remember this and treat others as if this is true?
6. Again, scripture tells us that Christ is "**the image of the invisible God.**" (Colossians 1:15) How does Jesus show us what humanity, made in God's image, is supposed to be like? And how is Jesus restoring that image in us?
7. Why do you think Jesus tells us that the way the world will know we are his followers is because they see us loving one another? (John 13:34-35) What is it about the love the church has for one another that can be such a powerful witness in this world?
8. How has Jesus been speaking to you through this message? How is he calling you to live or think differently?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



What does it mean when the Bible tells us that humans were made in God's image? What is different about us from the animals, the trees, the mountains, the oceans, which are not made in God's image?