

Human Community in the Image of God

From the sermon series: This Is Our Father's World

Text: Philippians 2: 1-11

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2: 1-11

This is our Father's world. We can be comfortable here because it is not an alien environment; it is a created reality made for us, and we for it. This is our Father's world. This is the great affirmation of the opening chapters of the scripture. As we look for a few weeks at those first eleven chapters of Genesis, which are so foundational for all the rest of biblical faith, I want to focus today on the creation of man and woman, on the creation of the human person. I want to say that we are created for human community; created in the image of God for human community. We are created for God and for one another, and our creation from the hand of God reflects our value and our worth and our dignity. I can't say everything in this message that there is to be said about the human being, the human creature. I'll have to come back in another week and I'll have to deal with the shadow side, that rebellion that has led to alienation and all of the havoc that we have created in the wake of that. So, what I'm going to say today is far more fundamental than what I'm going to say next week. It's far more important for

you to hear that you are a creature of God and loved by Him and created for His glory than it is to hear that you're a sinner. We've reversed that in the Church. We've stressed so much that we are sinners, and I suppose that is because the need has to be created before the remedy can be applied, but the most fundamental thing is that we are created in the image of God. Human potential and human possibility, human dignity and human worth - that's more fundamental than human deviation. It's a great message. And incidentally, perhaps if that message were heard more, there would be less of the shadow side manifesting itself. If we could ever get hold of the fact of who we really are, we might start acting like it. So, this message is to underscore the simple truth that as human beings, as men and women, we are created by the good and gracious God.

I want to say just a couple of simple things which you know already, but I'll say them again - we are created by God, we are created in the image of God, and we are created by God for community with Him and with one another. That's as simple as it is. We are created by God, and to say that we are created by God is to make an affirmation which in the Church may seem a truism which everybody believes and nobody would deny, but we don't live our lives out just in the Church and in the community of faith, and we have to recognize that, when we say that we are created by God, that is not a self-evident truth; it is not something believed by everybody; it is not something believed by every thinking person. It is a biblical statement. It is an affirmation of faith.

We have to recognize that our conviction about creation based on the scriptures is a conviction that arises out of the proclamation of the scripture. The opening chapters of Genesis are like the creed of creation. They are a song, they are a message, they are a sermon. They are not a religious speculative statement; they are not a philosophical discussion. They are not a scientific statement. They are affirmations of faith based on the experience of God's grace in Jesus Christ, or in Israel's case, God's grace in that deliverance from bondage in Egypt. The conviction about creation is an article about faith. We believe it, but we have to recognize that it is not self-evident. We have to recognize, too, that it is so foundational for so much else that we believe that we cannot simply take it for granted, but we must continue to make that affirmation intelligently, self-consciously with awareness. Because if we lose that, we lose everything. Almost everything that we believe subsequently in our biblical faith is posited on our conviction that we are creatures of worth and value and dignity because we have come from the hand of the Creator. There are other philosophies about, and there's a good deal of contrary opinion, and in very scholarly circles.

Sometimes to make a point it is good to hear the other side, and I did that last week, and I want to do it once again. This time I cite as an example a Nobel Prize-winning biologist, Jacques Monod, in his book, *Chance and Necessity*. Already the title tells you something, doesn't it? Chance and necessity as over against

purpose, intelligence and loving intention. Chance and necessity. This is what he said after a very negative statement about the human situation:

If he that is a human person accepts this negative message in its full significance, man at last must wake out of his millenary dreams and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realize that, like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world, a world that is deaf to his music and is indifferent to his hopes as it is to his suffering or his crimes.

We say we are created by God. Well, wait a minute. What if that isn't true? If that is not true, then the other is true. Then we can't say this is our Father's world, and that somehow or other we are a part of the whole created reality.

We say that this is a friendly environment which is good. According to the commentary of the Creator, there is a place where we can become what He has intended us to be. If that isn't true, then the other is true, that we live on the boundary of an alien world contrary to our purposes. Or worse, just indifferent to our purposes. Indifferent to our music. And indifferent to our hopes, our sufferings, our crimes. What that statement says is that, however we are involved in this process of human history as human creatures, there is no one at the beginning and there's no one at the end, and we aren't going anywhere in terms of any purpose or meaning. Now, I quote a very scholarly opinion so that I don't give the impression that biblical faith is just obvious and self-evident. No, there are good thinking people who have come to this kind of conclusion. That's why I say it is important for us to hear this as a declaration of faith. Then it's important for us to begin to draw the implications. The implications of Jacques Monod are that we have to wake up, grow up, face up to the darkness, to the coldness, to the meaningless of it all, so that whatever meaning there is, we'll have to create; whatever love there is, we'll have to generate. But there's no one and there's nothing more.

We don't believe that. We believe that God created us with an intention for our good. We believe that God created us with a thought in mind, with a self-conscious intelligence, and with a great purpose, and that this world is not an alien environment, but a friendly place in which human potential may be developed to realize the high calling with which He calls us.

Carl Sagan, the cosmologist, the one who does such a fantastic job with the films about the cosmos, and his book *Cosmos*, gives the other explanation. The other explanation is that some inanimate, non-living cell was triggered by some ray of light at some point, moved across the abyss from the inanimate to the animate stage, continued from that point in the development of cellular structure to increasing complexity to the present complexity of the human being. And where the primeval pea soup came from in the beginning, where the cell that God triggered came from in the beginning, how the ray of light ever activated it, about all of that, nothing is said. But what is claimed is that whatever is, is the

consequence of accident, of chance, moving on with the kind of inbuilt necessity, but going nowhere and having no accompanying purpose.

It's always good to look beyond the surface statement and say, "Then what does that mean?" So to say that God created us is a rather simple affirmation of faith, but it makes a world of difference as to how we view ourselves and understand our situation. We affirm that God created us, and when we say He created us, we're not talking about wind; we're not talking about techniques; we're not talking about the process. The Bible doesn't know anything about when it happened. It says, "In the beginning..." The Bible's affirmation is that all that is, is because He said, "Let there be ...," and that's all the Bible is interested in. All the rest the scientists can fight about.

In my class on Wednesday night, someone told me that the "Big Bang" theory of the origin of the universe is being challenged. The Big Bang has been popular of late in the circles of the physicists, and I could smile and say, "Oh, really? Well, I hope the scientists have a field day fighting about it. I don't care." Now, if I had said, "The Book of Genesis finally is verified," because a group of very scholarly people has said that the universe started in a Big Bang, which therefore spoke of an original moment of creation, then when the Big Bang blew up, my faith would blow up, too. I can't identify this Book with any ideology, philosophical position or scientific plank of any platform, because when I do, that which is transient and of human generation will be an unsteady foundation for this word of God. This word of God only says one thing. It says, "Whatever is, it is because He said, 'Let there be...'" And then the whole world can try to figure out how it happened. I mean, it doesn't really make any difference, does it? I told you last week that I saw the jawbone of the Heidelberg man in the University of Heidelberg Museum recently. Six hundred thousand years old, they say. It was discovered just outside the city of Heidelberg, and up on the chart they had visualized what they thought this creature had looked like. He stood up straight, with a little resemblance to primates (big monkeys). Now, the Bible doesn't know anything about the linkage backward from where we are. And there are some people who have been offended by the claim that maybe we've got monkeys in our past. Well, I would say that just an objective observation of human behaviour would give a great deal of support to the idea that there might be a lot of monkeys in our past. "There's a lot of monkey business going on!"

But, you see, that's not even a biblical issue; it doesn't even matter. And yet, oh, has not the Church churned over that issue? When did a human being become a human being? Well, I'll tell you when. That's the second thing I want to say. It's when the whatever was there was addressed by God and knew himself, knew herself to be addressed and was able to *respond* in kind. It was in the moment in which consciousness dawned and that created person, animal, whatever you want to call it, suddenly understood itself, gained a beginning sense of identity and self-awareness, self-reflection and the ability to respond to being addressed. The first word of a first human being was a prayer. And when that creature learned to

pray, that creature could be called human. For to be human is to be created in the image of God, to be like God. And it doesn't really matter whether the human being sprang fresh from the word or at some point in the process heard the word, the creative word that called him or her forth. The fact is that when this creature came face to face with God we could speak of being human.

In the image of God, our scripture tells us, is like God. God made us like Himself. It's an amazing truth. Therefore, we accord to one another dignity and value and worth, and we never put ourselves down either; for the most fundamental fact about us is that we are a reflection of God. If I could pile up scripture upon scripture this morning I could have also read Psalm 8, "Lord our God, how excellent is Thy name in all the earth. When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy hands, the sun and moon, which Thou hast made, what is man that Thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that Thou visited him?"

Ah, the Psalmist who didn't have an inkling about the expanses of the cosmos as you and I do, nonetheless looked into the starry sky and knew that those stars were a long way away, and he felt himself in the expansiveness of his world to be insignificant and small. But then he had even a deeper intuition, for he went on to say, "For Thou hast created him a little less than God and given him dominion." Reflecting our chapter this morning, the most profound thing is that we are created by God and made like Him to reflect Him.

My Professor Berkhof coins, at least in the English translation, the word "respondable," in reference to the human being. Respondable. By that he is meaning to say he is responsible to respond, or he might not, but he can. Respondable. He has the capacity to respond. He has the capacity to respond to the address of God and he is created for love and he is free in that condition of respondability. So you're really something! I preached on that subject one time. *You are really something.* You can never put yourself down. No matter how tarnished and tainted and withered and wilted. No matter how great the failure, how deep the abyss - you can never put yourself down. Nor may we ever put one another down. For we've come from the hand of God, and we're a reflection of His glory.

And He has created us for communion with Himself and with one another. To be human is to be addressable, respondable, to be in covenant with God. If we believe that He created us, then He created us with purpose, on purpose, with meaning and, of course, He created us to be that over against Him with whom He could commune and upon whom He could shed His love. And we'll have to speak next week about the fact that we've not taken well to that, that we've not opened ourselves up to that potential that is ours to live in the light of that love and grace. But there's still good news, because there is one of us that has done precisely that and that is Jesus.

Paul, obviously with reference to Genesis 1, in Philippians 2 tells us about Jesus. Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, thought equality with God not to be

something grasped after, but rather emptied himself, indeed was made in fashion as the human being and became a servant and humbled himself unto death, even the death of the cross. And that passage has been the center of Christological controversy over the centuries, but it's such a paradox because it is such a practical, pastoral appeal to this congregation whom Paul dearly loved. He wrote,

If our common life in Christ yields anything to stir the heart, any loving consolation, any sharing of the Spirit, any warmth of affection or compassion, fill up my cup of happiness by thinking and feeling alike with the same love for one another, the same turn of mind and the common care for unity.

There must be no room for rivalry and personal vanity among you, but you must humbly reckon others better than yourselves. And then he appeals to Jesus. And after saying all of this, after this warm appeal for warmth and the binding together of human community, he said,

"Well, let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

That's why he talks about Jesus and his relationship to God and his emptying and his death. Not to give us some Christological discussion about the divine and human in Jesus, but to say to the human congregation, "Will you be human and will you allow community to flourish and blossom through lowliness in mind, esteeming others better than yourselves, through warmth and affection and compassion, in a word, let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

The first Adam grasped after the prerogative of the Creator. The second Adam, the new man, Jesus, offered himself up in total obedience and subservience to the Father and became the instrument of reconciliation between God and human beings, between human being and human being, and between human beings and the whole created order, so that now in Christ we can say we are new creations, restored in the image of God and if anyone is in Christ, it is a whole new creation. There is harmony with nature and peace with God and reconciliation one with another, human community, realizing the intentions of the Creator.

The creation story in the first chapter ends with the celebration of all of this in the Sabbath rest. And the Sabbath rest is a sign pointing to the ultimate Sabbath rest when the Shalom of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. How important it is, then, that we begin now to incarnate, to live out this peace with God through Jesus Christ and reconciliation with one another in harmony with the created world. You are really something! We are called to become what we are.

Let us pray. God, our Father, enable us to catch a glimpse of the wonder of being human and then, through the power and grace of Your good Spirit, enable us to live humanly and to provide in the community of faith an alternative society and

a sign pointing to that Kingdom which is surely coming when there shall be peace on earth. Hear our prayer through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.