“Imago Dei”

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Genesis 1:26-31
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What is human life worth?
Let me personalize the question.
What are you worth?
To address this question let me take you back to the era in which Christianity originated. First century culture was dominated by Greek and Roman influences. Life in this Greco-Roman world was brutish. Human life was regarded as cheap and expendable.

We can illustrate this cheapness in any number of ways. Take infanticide—the unimaginable practice of killing babies! In those days, frail and disabled babies were routinely put to death. Baby girls who were considered an economic liability were left to die of exposure. According to historian Everett Ferguson, no group in the first century opposed the barbaric practice until Christians voiced their opposition. An early catechumen document called the Didache, written sometime in the first or second century AD, states in no uncertain terms, “Thou shall not commit infanticide.”

Christians didn’t stop there. They expressed a similar aversion to discarding the elderly and widows. They took up the plight of the poor and marginalized. They elevated the status of women. They spoke out against incest and all manner of abuse.

What motivated Christians to stand up against these prevailing cultural attitudes and advocate for human worth? It was the Biblical doctrine of *Imago Dei*, which is Latin for the image of God. Human life has meaning and purpose precisely because every person is created in the image of God.

Genesis portrays creation as a series of seven days or epochs in which God makes the earth habitable for human life. On the 6th day God says, “Let us make humanity 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, over the cattle and the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humanity in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (1:26-27).

Some will want me to speak to issues related to evolution. It’s a subject for another day but let me say this much: evolution is not at odds with the Genesis creation story. God most likely utilized evolutionary processes to accomplish his objectives.
It is curious in Genesis that all living creatures save one is created “according to its kind.” This phrase is repeated ten times in a span of 14 verses. Vegetation and trees are created “according to its kind” (1:11-12). Birds are created “according to its kind” (1:22). Sea creatures are created “according to its kind” (1:22). Cattle are created “according to its kind” (1:24). Wild animals are created “according to its kind” (1:24). Creeping things (and things that go bump in the night) are created “according to its kind” (1:25). But on the 6th day, God breaks the mold. Human beings are not made according to their kinds. They are made according to God’s kind. They are created in God’s image. They are given a soul to relate and correspond to God.

Two words come to mind when I think of being created in the image of God: dignity and dominion. First, every person has dignity and worth because we are created in the image of God. In the Greco-Roman world, people had worth relative to their value to society. Human worth was measured by things like race, gender, physical abilities and intellect. Christians claimed that people have intrinsic value. They believed human dignity is not measured by cognitive abilities or physical capacity. It is measured by the value God places on human life. No wonder they clashed with the prevailing culture.

On a weekend in which we honor Martin Luther King, I remind you of how this civil rights leader arrived at his convictions about human worth. He read it in Genesis. I was reading one of Martin Luther King’s sermons this past week that he preached at his father’s Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta where he was raised. He compared people to a keyboard saying, “Every person from a treble white to a bass black is significant in God’s keyboard because every man is made in the image of God.”

The second word, dominion, also expresses what it means to be created in God’s image. God says, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves upon the earth” (1:28). Exercising dominion doesn’t give us license to practice tyranny or
exploitation. We discharge our duties toward the earth in humble reliance on God. Every Christian ought to be an environmentalist.

We talk about God’s Big Story in this church using three words: creation, fall and redemption. Creation, the first word expresses that we are created in God’s image to live in relationship with God. Fall, the second word, describes how people fall out of relationship with God through sin. Some Christians contend that God’s image is destroyed by the fall. I can find no evidence of the obliteration of God’s image the fall in Scripture. After the fall, the image of God is “frightfully deformed” in the words of the 16th century Reformer John Calvin but not destroyed.

In some people, such as hardened criminals or cranky neighbors, it seems that there is hardly a trace left of this divine image. Yet it’s in there someplace. We do not lose our essential humanity in the fall. What we lose is communion with God.

Redemption, the third word, describes what God does to restore us to the image. Scripture declares that God sends his Son in the likeness of God to redeem us to God’s likeness. As we are progressively united to Christ, we are restored to the image of God.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? The Imago Dei principle has two essential applications. The first application relates to our individual lives and the second corresponds to our mission as a church.

First, let’s think in terms of individual worth. Where do you ascribe your sense of worth? Let’s suppose you derive your sense of worth from your appearance. But what happens if your appearance is marred by accident, age or illness? What would aging, accident or illness do to your sense of self? Or suppose your sense of self is tied to your success in school. So what happens if your friends put you down or you don’t make the grade or get into the college of your choice? What does that do to your sense of self? Or you could tie your sense of self to job and career. So what happens if you lose your job or get passed over for a promotion or retire from your job? What does this do to your sense of worth? The same principle applies if you tie your self-worth to your net asset stock portfolio, your friends and family.

Don’t you see how measuring your sense of worth by anything of relative merit is temporal and fleeting? I’m urging you to shift your focus to something of lasting value. The Imago Dei principle has lasting
intrinsic value. That’s why we make a big deal of Jesus. He restores us to the image God intends for us.

The second application relates to our mission as the people of God. We live in a day in which the Christian ethic of intrinsic worth is being challenged and even undermined. Let me introduce you to Dr. Peter Singer, who teaches bioethics at Princeton University. Dr. Singer ascribes to a “Quality of Life Ethic.” His ethics are strictly utilitarian. He measures people’s worth by their usefulness in society. Singer places greater worth on the able-bodied than the disabled. He places greater value on the young than the elderly. He places greater value on people with cognitive abilities than people with significant cognitive impairments.

He’s a proponent of infanticide. He believes newborns do not become actual persons for 28 days. As one who supports animal rights, he favors using infants and other “nonpersons” in medical experiments. He’s a big advocate of rationing health care to the able-bodied and limiting it to those with mental impairments.

I don’t want to be an alarmist here, but it’s a chilling indictment of where the philosophy of relative worth could be taking us. Singer is not some crackpot; he’s a well-regarded professor at a leading university. New Yorker magazine calls him the most influential philosopher alive.

The monstrous ethical assumptions of the Greco-Roman age are at our doorstep. It remains to be seen whether our western society, which is rapidly abandoning its faith in God, can maintain belief in human worth on intrinsic grounds.

God calls upon the church with similar courage and humility to our Christian forebears to challenge the assumptions of our secular age.

I started this sermon with a question, “What is your life worth?”, using the image of a bar code to accompany it. I close with the Latin phrase Imago Dei and a fingerprint. No two fingerprints among the billions that have been examined by the human eye and computer comparisons have ever been found to be exactly alike. Even identical twins do not bear the same fingerprint. You are literally one of a kind. You have value and worth because you are created in the image of God.

What are you worth? Let God have the last word.