

In His Image: Made for Relationships

Theme: The image of God in man is that we were made for relationship with God and each other.

Text: Genesis 1:26-2:3

Series: The Dignity of Human Life

What are humans worth? Last week we discovered that Genesis 1 teaches us that we human beings are the culmination of God's creative work and the only aspect of the created order that bears the divine imprint. In other words, we are sacred to God and therefore are of such value that when we fell from grace the Creator became the Redeemer and pursued us all the way to the cross.

There are other worldviews that do not have such a lofty view of human life:

- 1. Humans are fantastic biological machines.** If you were to go to the *Body Worlds* exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry, this is one of the messages you would receive. Buckminster Fuller gave this mechanistic description of human life, "Man is a self-balancing, 28 jointed, adapter-biped, an electro-chemical reduction plant...with 62,000 miles of capillaries, millions of warning signals, and a universally distributed telephone system which needs no service for 70 years if managed well."
- 2. We are the products of blind evolution:** The late evolutionist Stephen Gould wrote, "We are because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar anatomy that could transform into legs into terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter million years ago, had managed, so far, to survive by hook or by crook. We may yearn for a higher answer—but none exists."
- 3. We are determined.** A generation ago, the behaviorist B. F. Skinner wrote a book entitled *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* in which he said that freedom is an illusion. Human beings are determined. We are simply the product of our genetic code plus environmental conditioning. He concluded, given that humans are determined creatures we should take charge of the evolutionary process and create *superbeings*. How frightening is that! Hitler tried it with the Aryan race and look what happened.

Our Declaration of Independence contains sublime theology, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are

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life, liberty and the pursuits of happiness." What our founders understood was that if you separate the dignity of man from the Creator, human beings lose their inherent worth as beings made in God's image. The 20th Century is clear and consistent testimony to the horrors of what humans are capable when atheistic philosophies predominate.

But what do we mean when we say that humans are created in the image of God? What exactly is the image of God in man? In other words, in what way do we resemble God?

1. **Physical:** The most concrete answer is that might we bear some physical resemblance to God. Don't you hope this isn't true? We look like God?! Or God looks like us. Mark Twain once said, "God created man in His image, and man has returned the favor." This is the doctrine of the Mormon Church. They teach that the image of God is physical. God has or is a body. Since the Scriptures uses images such as "the eyes of God" or "His outstretched hand" or "His mighty arm", this is taken literally. It is also true that the Bible says that God protects his brood under his outspread wings, so we could conclude that God is a chicken. I don't think so.

I think it best to seek more abstract qualities.

2. **Others Qualities:** Over the ages there has been much theological speculation as to what exactly separates humans from the animal world and just how we reflect the image of God. This speculation has kept many a theology occupied. I call it the full employment plan for theologians. The following is a small sampling of what theologians have proposed about human beings that might reflect characteristics of God: 1. **Reason:** Man has the ability to think complex and abstract thoughts that I would never have attributed our dog, Annie. 2. **Freedom of choice:** We are not simply instinctual beings but have the capacity to make choices between alternatives. 3. **Moral Choice:** We can distinguish between right and wrong and actually register guilt and shame when we violate some ethical norm. 4. **Self transcendence:** We have the capacity to actually reflect on the meaning of our own life; we can step outside of ourselves and ask the "why" questions.

As interesting as these proposals are, I say, when in doubt read text. Don't speculate. Exegete. What does the Scripture say? Are there clues in the biblical text that would lead us to the right direction?

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Clue #1: The Plurality of God

The first clue is the interesting self-description of God in the plural. Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." What do we make of the one God, describing Himself as "us" and "our"? Might this lead us to an understanding of what it is that we reflect about God?

How do we explain God talking about Himself in the plural? With whom is he having a conversation? Again there has been much speculation.

1. Is it the plural of majesty? This might be what is called the royal "we". When a king delivers an edict, speaking from the throne, he might be heard to say, "We issue the following decree..."
2. Perhaps it is the heavenly court that was present at creation. In Job 38:4,7 we read, "When I laid the foundations of the earth...all the sons of God shouted for joy." Perhaps there were heavenly beings present when God created and shared the joy of the moment. But the "sons of God" present were an audience observing God at work, not co-creators with God.
3. I believe the best explanation is to see the plural here as an early and veiled reference to the Trinity. Though the author of Genesis could not have articulated the doctrine of God as one being who is three persons, we can certainly see from the greater light of the New Testament what was hinted at here is the very first description of God.

To whom was God speaking when He said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." Himself. Stay with me here. The only reality that existed prior to God bringing creation into being was God Himself. "In the beginning God..." so opens the book of Genesis. This was a self-sufficient and self-existent being. There was no time when God did not exist. Nothing caused God. He was complete in and of Himself. As a triune God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God existed in community, in fellowship. I realize that even thinking this thought can give us a head-ache or as one person put it, thinking about the eternity of God gives one a hernia between the ears. A confounded child wrote his pastor. "Dear Pastor. Who created God? Is there a God for God?"

We came to believe in the Trinity because we came to believe that Jesus is God and yet He had a relationship with His Father and was not the same as the Father. Jesus had a consciousness of an eternal relationship with the Father, and yet affirmed that there was only one God. In Jesus' final prayer in John 17, John records these remarkable words, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had in your presence before the world was made" (John 17:5).

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Do you hear the nostalgia in Jesus' voice? He longs to be back at home in a face to face relationship with His Father that he has had forever, prior to anything in creation coming into being. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Jesus was present with the Father at creation and was co-creator.

What does this mean then about the image of God in humans? Just as God from all eternity is a being-in-fellowship so we are *made for relationship*. The image of God is a *relational* image. All of those qualities that I mentioned before: reason, choice, self-transcendence serve a larger purpose, they are all needed to have a mutual relationship.

Why then did God create? Was God lonely and needed someone to relate to? No. God was self-sufficient. There was love within the Trinity. The three-person God was the original community. Was God making up for some deficiency within Himself? On the contrary, we read in Acts 17:25: "God is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all people life and everything else."

God created out of the overflow and fullness of His love. There was so much delight within God himself that He wanted others to be drawn into the circle of love that was enjoyed in the original family. The German mystic, Meister Eckhart, once said that God created out of the *laughter of the Trinity*. There is a sense in which God could not contain himself, he wanted others to be drawn into the life enjoyed in the Godhead.

You have endured a lot of theology to this point. Let me tell a personal story, that you may have heard but it bears repeating as a human analogy. Being cutting edge baby boomers, my wife, Lily and I are children of the 60's. We were married in 1969. The spirit of the 60's was maximum freedom. Why be tied down by children? Be free to follow the wind. Travel, pull up stakes, go at a moment's notice. If we needed to pull out more altruistic sounding reasons as to why we didn't want to have children, we could say that we did not want to bring one more mouth to feed in an already overpopulated world, or who wants to expose a child to the threat of nuclear holocaust? So our stance to others and ourselves in the first years of marriage was that we really didn't want to have children.

Yet secretly, unbeknownst to each other, these reasons began to wear thin. We were both changing our mind about our desire to have children, but afraid to express it to each other until...we suspected that Lily was pregnant. Next step, off to the doctor to confirm the suspicions. The report came back negative. It was only then that we dared to tell each other how crushed we were with that news. Even with the thought of having a child, a love had already grown in our hearts to have a product of our together love that we could bestow upon another. We were frankly startled with the intensity of love that had emerged for

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this child of promise. Our together love wanted one who could be included in our love for each other.

Well, I am happy to let you that the initial report from the doctor was wrong, and we have an almost 30 year child as evidence.

On a human level we can appreciate how an infinite God of love might overflow to create us so that we can be drawn back into original community, we know as the Trinity. We were made to live in community just as God is community.

Clue #1: The Plurality of God

Clue #2: Man as male and female

The second clue we see in our text that indicates what it means to be created in the image of God is found in v. 27: **"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, *male and female* he created them."** Just as God is a plural being, so are we humans. Humanity is male and female in the image of God. Just as God is differentiated being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so humans beings are differentiated into men and women. Humanity in God's image comes into the form of a complementary relationship. Man and woman are incomplete without each other. We will look at this in more detail next week, when we study the latter part of Genesis 2. In Genesis 2 man is made prior to woman. Before man is completed with the creation of woman, the Scripture says, **"It is not good for man to be alone."** It is only when the woman is brought to the man that he exclaims, **"At last bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh."** At last, someone like me yet different from me. We only know we are in the reflection of another. Solitary humanity is inhumanity.

I like the cute story about the small boy who is with his family in a restaurant. The waitress comes to the table and recites the daily specials, but he but didn't hear what he wanted. So when the waitress asked for his order, he said, **"I'll have a hotdog."** He mother smoothly slipped in, **"He will have the roast beef and mashed potatoes."** But the waitress never taking her eyes off the boy, ignoring the mother, asked, **"What do you want on your hot dog?" "Mustard!"**, he shot back. As the waitress left, the little boy sat quietly for a few moments, deep in thought. He finally tugged on his mother's arm, **"Mommy, that lady thinks I'm real."**

We only know who we are in the reflection of others; we were made for community. We are social beings. In other words, it is all about relationships. That is what it means to be created in the image of God.

Isn't it interesting, when Jesus is asked, **"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"** He answers in terms of relationship, **"Love the Lord your God**

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with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is like this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:28-31).

Life reduced to its essence is relationship. I remember clearly when it first dawned on me that life is a lot simpler than we make it. I was then a 30 year old solo pastor of a small church in the Southern California. Jerry, a 19 year old strapping football player, had been hit by a car while riding his motorcycle. He received a severe blow on the back of his head, riding without a helmet. He languished at St. Joseph's Hospital on a respirator for about 10 days. The family camped out in the hospital visitor's lounge. Immediate family and friends prayed, loved each other, and waited in hope and despair. They leaned into God and on each other. After many a visit to the hospital to be with family and friends, late one evening I walked into the still of the night after having been with the family. I thought to myself, "When it comes down to it life is really very simple. All that is important is the God we love and the people we love." At that moment, jobs, ambition, earning power, vacations, made no difference at all. Crises sort out what is important.

To be made in the image of God means to put absolute priority on two relationships.

1. **The first order of priority is our relationship with God.** The Sabbath is about keeping the relationship with God as the priority. God rested on the seventh day and this was to be the pattern and practice that all God-fearers would follow. After God had exalted in all that he had created and declared it very good, we read, "By the seventh day God had finished his work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating he had done" (Gen. 2:2,3).

Was God tired and therefore needed to rest? No. The word rest or Sabbath means to cease or desist from labor. The Sabbath on the seventh day was time for the Lord to take pleasure in all that he had created. He stopped and enjoyed, all that had been brought into being—especially his creation of those in his image. The Sabbath rhythm then becomes a pattern that we are follow. We need a weekly time when we cease our striving, creating, money-making, and accumulating. We rest in God and enjoy the pleasure of our relationship with him. We remind ourselves that God created us out of the laughter of the Trinity because he wants to draw us into the family circle. The Sabbath is God's way for us to put life into the perspective of the eternal, when we can so easily get caught up in all that is. We remind ourselves of what is important.

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William Wilberforce, a Christian member of Parliament and the leader of the band of brothers who fought against slavery in the British Empire, credits his practice of keeping the Sabbath for keeping him on track. He was being pursued by the Prime Minister for a cabinet level position, which threatened to derail from His God-given call to rid the British Empire of slavery. In his words “he had risings of ambition” that were crippling his soul. Wilberforce recorded these words in his journal about the Sabbath, “Blessed be to God for the day of rest and religious occupation wherein earthly things assume their true size. Ambition is stunted.”

Why the need for a Sabbath? It is a statement about our need. We quickly lose perspective. We get caught in the present and lose the perspective of eternity. We need a weekly time to put our lives into a broader focus. This is what worship is to be all about. We step into eternity from time when we enter the sanctuary. OH, do we ever need to recapture the practice of a day, whatever day that is, that is dedicated to rest and enjoyment of our God, just to remind ourselves for whom we were made.

If the first implication of being created in God’s image is the priority of our relationship with God, then...

1. The second order of priority is our relationship with others.

Let me illustrate this need for the priority of relationship with each other through a counseling relationship I had with a man in previous church I served. He was a man on the brink—the precipice of a decision. What brought him to me was an intense turmoil that had threatened their marriage. They had decided to separate to reduce the level of hostility. The respite from the hostility had been welcomed by both. He was enjoying being alone. He was finding his business, a second career, stimulating and financially rewarding. He was getting excited about an old hobby that even had some promise of being lucrative. The only trouble was that if he pursued the hobby, it would surely take him further away from his spouse, and give less reason to even want reconciliation.

Toward the end of our hour together, he made a very matter of fact statement—a kind of summary assessment of where he saw his life at that moment. He said it in such a way that the significance didn’t even seem to dawn on him. He said, “Everything in my life seems to be going well...(then he paused) except for my relationships.”

I don’t recall now whether I said out loud what I was thinking or simply the voice shouted inside my own head and heart. What I recall feeling was, “Except for relationships! Isn’t this the heart of the matter? I mean if our primary relationships are in disarray, what does the rest matter?”

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All I can do in a message like this is to remind us of priorities. Success in this life is first and foremost measured by growing in our ability to love God and love our spouse, children, family, church community, and neighbors. As it has been said, "No one comes to the end of their life, and says, 'I wish I had spent more time at the office.'"

This is not easy because we live in a culture that values productivity over persons, see people as interchangeable parts on a job, puts economic pursuits above hospitality. Our culture is not hospitable to the priority of relationships. I was teaching a class in the Philippines a number of years and was invited to an extended lunch at the home a student who came from Damascus, Syria. Riad's wife had laid out a hospitable spread. We were somewhere into the multiple course when I caught a quick glance at my watch. I was conscious of needing to start preparing for the next day's teaching. Riad saw me and it lit a fuse. "You Westerners are all alike he said. You always have somewhere to go. For us we put priority on relationships. Our time is spent with people. You are always concerned about the almighty dollar with little time for people."

All I can do this morning is raise the question of intent. If to be made in God's image is to be made for relationships—with God and each other, then how are we doing? It is not easy to rearrange one's life around relationships when our entire Western value system does not support. But we have lost the battle before we have started, if we have not made up our mind to at least engage the battle.

God is a being-in-fellowship from all eternity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Disciples are made by "baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." This means that our primary identity is found in community. The new community that God is creating on earth is called the church. This community places a high value on the rhythm of Sabbath, because that is the way to keep God first. It also says that being a follower of Jesus Christ is to throw one's life into the community that He is redeeming. We are to be the reflection together of the life of the Triune God.

It is a beautiful thing we are seeing God do here at Christ Church. Many of us experienced a community during Project Serve, maybe it was the first time you felt a part of things. Over and over again I have heard reports of people who engaged in relationship with others they might never had connected with as they leaned into a hoe or slept a paint brush. Intergenerational conversations, tradesmen and high-rise business people, formed connections in community. We are seeing the growth of our mid-size communities that meet on Sundays and during the week as places designed to find people like yourselves. This morning we had have the report from the Nehemiah ministry of people have journeyed

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together during these last 9 months to discover God's call on their life. Won't you try one out and let us welcome you to be a part.

If we find ourselves saying, "I don't time for these things", perhaps we will pause and say, "If I don't have time, perhaps my priorities are not consistent with the way I have been made."

You see this is what we are made for..."Hear God say to you, it is not good for man to be alone, but I will make a community for you that is a reflection of the community of love that We share."