

**“The Image of God”**  
**How to Be Human, Part I**  
**Grace United Methodist Church**  
**12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 31, 2016**

The New York Times recently described a new TV ad that asks the question, “Who am I?” It goes something like this:

*“Who am I? What kind of person?” a gravelly, brooding voice asks at the start of the ad, as a man stands on a beach watching the sun rise.*

*Piano music swells. “Perhaps you’ve never thought about it,” the voice says.*

*“I’m the one who leaves latest,” the voice says as a teacher tidies an empty classroom. “I’m the one who starts work earliest,” it says as a street sweeper starts the day.*

*“I’m the one who thinks least about himself,” the voice says as an exhausted surgeon falls asleep on the floor after finishing another operation.*

*Other scenes of selfless dedication in everyday life follow. [Then it closes with this:] “I’m the Chinese Communist Party, always together with you,” the voice concludes.*

Who am I? Who are you?

In many ways this is one of the core questions of life. And make no mistake, this question may not be on your mind all the time, but all the time there is someone or something trying to tell you who you are – advertisers and politicians, friends and spouses, family and musician and TV writers. As Christians, we have a particular answer to this question that comes from Scripture.

This series is called “How to Be Human,” and in the coming weeks we will explore four aspects of what the Bible describes as key to our humanity. According to Scripture, each and everyone one of us, every human that has ever lived, is a creature made in the image of God, a mixture of both dust and divinity. We will unpack that in the coming month, beginning today with that strange phrase “the image of God.”

Humans are identified as image-bearers of God going all the way back to the very first chapter of Genesis. Look at the creation story in Genesis 1 and see how clear God is about the intent in making humans. After 5 days of creation we have sun and stars and antelopes and amoebas, oceans and creeks and puddles, but no us. On the sixth day, God decides to make something different. God makes us. Whether this happened over 6 24-hour days in a literal sense or over a long, long time I will bracket out for the time being; but suffice it to say that God is not bound by our clocks and calendars and can create in an instant or in a millennium – we can talk about that later.

Now, when we get to the end of Genesis 1 we have these beautiful and mysterious words:

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us (us?? What could that mean?) make humankind 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.”

<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;

Many Christians (and Jews) have read these words for centuries and centuries and pondered their meaning. They are reiterated later in Genesis 5:1 and throughout Scripture. What does it mean to be made in the image of God – a God who is, as they old hymn says, “immortal, invisible”? The Hebrew word for image there means something like “carved out,” or hewn; a loose, contemporary way of putting it might be to say that we are “chips off the block.”

Obviously there is something more than a physical image going on here. It might have something to do with God being a Trinity of persons, that just as God is in God’s very nature a community, we too are made for relationship with others. It might have something to do with authority, with dominion, that God grants us a part in stewarding God’s creation. Kenneth Wilson says that Creation in God’s image implies “personal, affectionate, other-directed life.”

In most accounts, being partakers of God’s image seems to imply freedom, consciousness, conscience, the ability to know and to respond to God’s love. The opening chapters of Genesis make clear that part of being image-bearers meant that humans walked in harmony with God, knowing and conversing with God – having an unbroken and perfect relationship with the Creator.

Unfortunately that is not the full story. Mark Twain, in his characteristic wit, once wrote, “Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.” When sin enters the picture, that image of God is distorted. Humans no longer perfectly reflect God’s love, and are no longer capable of an unbroken relationship with God. Something crucial and beautiful has been lost. In the history of Christian thinking this has been called “original sin,” the idea that primordially, though we were created in perfect relationship to God, sin has damaged that relationship and mangled the image of God in us.

Now, all that sounds pretty bleak. But isn’t Twain right, and even more importantly, isn’t Scripture? Before we can take the medicine we need to know the disease. It’s not that hard to look at the newspaper – or in my case, look at the CNN app on my phone – and realize things are not as they should be. Someone once joked that sin is the only Christian doctrine you can prove empirically, because its effects are all around us all the time.

Let me explain what I mean. I once read a chilling book called *Ordinary Men*, a history that tells the story of a police unit in Poland during World War II during the most intense months of the Holocaust. Between the middle of 1942 and the end of 1943, this unit of 500 reserve police officers shot an estimated 38,000 Jews and deported over 45,000 to Treblinka, an extermination camp second only to Auschwitz in the number of people killed. What the book explores is how this rather unremarkable group of men – not Nazi hardliners, not heavily indoctrinated SS storm troopers, but “ordinary men,” husbands and fathers and brothers and sons – became a part of something so terrible.

The author concludes that a number of factors contributed: traditions of racism; war fury; deference to authority; career advancement; bureaucracy; peer pressure, and other forces conspired together. But this is cold comfort, because the chilling truth is that many of these factors are found in nations

around the world. He closes the last chapter of the book by asking this: “If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?”

That’s what we mean by a distorted image of God, a woundedness that is somewhere deep in us. We know that this is not the total story about human beings, but it is part of the story. There are counter-examples, of course. We talked last week about Bonhoeffer, a German pastor that died resisting the Nazis and the Nazified church. Thank God there are people that have not succumbed to their worst instincts, people that have risen about pettiness and racism and evil, people that go and join the peace corps, people that spend their days feeding the hungry, people that go about their ordinary lives without committing crimes or atrocities.

That, for me, is the great question that human life puts forward: how do we account for the fact that human beings can be simultaneously so horrible and capable of evil and yet there also be humans who are upright, and self-sacrificial, and decent, and even saints? Neither the “I’m okay/you’re okay/we’re all okay” wishful thinking of the self-help shelves nor the doom and gloom that tells us everything and everyone is just going bad and people are all selfish animals are any help here. The story is more complicated than that.

But it’s a story that we know. I want to suggest that the Genesis account of who we are is the truest account there is, an account that makes sense both of our possibilities and our failures, our amazing generosity and our horror. Because what Genesis posits is this: we are created in love in the very image of a God who declares us “very good,” but that this image has been damaged – not without repair, not necessarily permanently – but still severely. Jesus, in taking our flesh, living our life, dying our death, and rising to new life has restored this image, making it possible once more for us to walk with God in harmony, makes it possible for us once more to reflect God’s love into the world.

That’s why Paul tells the Colossians (we opened the service with this) to put on the new self which is being “renewed...according to the image of its creator.” This vivid portrait is one way of describing salvation itself. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, often talked about salvation this way. He once wrote that for him salvation is not the “vulgar” notion of avoiding hell or going to heaven, but a restoration of the soul to its original health, “a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God.” (See his, *“A Farther Appeal”*) In fact, it would not be a terrible idea to look at the whole of Scripture through this lens. (One of our Sunday School classes is doing a great study called *The Story*, that looks at Scripture as one big narrative arc – here is a similar way of looking at Scripture.)

The Bible, in this way of looking at it, is from beginning to end a story about a God of boundless love who makes creatures in God’s own image, capable of enjoying him, and when that image is broken and distorted by human rebellion, God goes to great lengths to restore his beloved children to who he made us to be. The whole of Scripture after Genesis 3 can be summed up, just about, as a story about a God who seeks to restore his own image in us, to make us whole, to heal and redeem us from our own self-destructive ways.

One other story from the gospels drives home the point we are getting at. One day some teachers of the law tried to trap Jesus into answering a question that was guaranteed to get him in trouble. Remember that at the time of Jesus’ ministry Jerusalem and all Israel was occupied territory, ruled by the Romans. Some teachers of the law asked Jesus whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. So, notice the trap: if Jesus says yes, pay them, it would alienate him from the common people who despised the Romans, but if he says no, they have grounds for treason and could get rid of him by other means. Jesus sees through it. He asks them for the coin that is used to pay the tax.

He demands, “Whose image is on the coin?” “Caesar’s,” is the reply. Jesus replies, “So give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Now there is a lot here and we won’t get to all of it. This passage is often used to talk about a separation of state and church, or of religion and politics. I don’t think that’s what’s going on here at all. Notice what Jesus asks – “whose image?” Then his reply makes clear that the image is tied to ownership – whoever’s image is on it, that’s who it belongs to. Might it be that Jesus was telling his opponents, and telling us today, that we who are made in God’s image belong to God?

A classic statement of Christian faith, the Westminster Catechism begins with this question: “What is the chief end of man?” (Or, the primary purpose of humanity?) The answer is a beautiful summation of the Christian life: “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

God’s glory is our mission – to reflect God’s love and justice and mercy and beauty back into the world. NT Wright says that as human beings we are to be like angled mirrors – in our praise and thanksgiving we reflect God’s glory back to God, and through us God reflects his glory out to the world. As the image of God in us is restored per Colossians 3, we can do this more and better and truer. And in so doing, we become not simply holier or better Christians or forgiven – all that is true – but if Genesis is right about who we are and I believe that it is – then this process of renewal after God’s image makes us ultimately more human.

What does it mean to be human? Every day a thousand different messages come at us. But Scripture is clear that to be human is to claim our identity as image-bearers of God, to put on the new self that is being renewed in God’s likeness, and to reflect God’s will and ways into the world around us. That is our vocation, our calling.

Amen.

NYT Story: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/world/asia/china-communist-party-propaganda.html>