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Bridge Street United Church
September 15, 2024
Readings: Genesis 1:24 – 2:3; Psalm 8; Mark 8:27-38

Created in God's Image

“Then God said, ‘Let us 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.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. So God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”

It is a remarkable claim—that we are made in God's image. Without question, the account of creation as we find it in Genesis, chapter one, sees human beings at the apex of the created order, having a higher status than any of the other creatures God has made. But that understanding of our place in creation, and the nature of our relationship to God, is found elsewhere in Scripture. Take Psalm 8, our responsive Psalm this morning, for example: “When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea.”

I want to talk this morning about that picture of creation, as found in Genesis, chapter one, and supplemented elsewhere in Scripture. I want to talk about what I think this picture does, and does not, say, about our creation as human beings and also about the implications for how we live of that idea that we are created in the image of God.

First, that picture we find in Genesis chapter one about the creation of the human being portrays a remarkable closeness existing between we human beings and God. And Psalm 8 paints a similar picture. Now you might be quick to remind me that often we human beings can be anything but God-like. And we have a Prayer of Confession in our worship service each Sunday for a reason. We are not God—both Genesis, chapter one, and Psalm 8 make that clear. We are flawed. We make mistakes, some of them grievous. From our side, as human beings, there is both a closeness to God and a distance from God. We are made in the image of God—that speaks to the closeness. “A little lower than God” or, in a translation we sometimes see “a little lower than the angels,” is the way Psalm 8 conveys that same idea. Created in the image of God reflects a closeness to God.

Genesis chapter one speaks about we human beings being given “dominion” over the all the creatures God created, and Psalm 8 likewise talks about us being given “dominion over the works of your hands.” We need to be clear here about what “dominion” means. Being given dominion over the other creatures of creation does speak to a higher status or place in relation to the other creatures. But dominion does not mean dominating, or exploiting, or lording it over. Rather, the concept means a sense of care for the rest of creation from that position we hold, indeed a call to care. The concept of “steward” is what is intended here. It was a well-known concept in Biblical times, the steward being the individual in charge of the operations of a household or a business operation, responsible for ensuring that things functioned well in the

household, that the business ran well and efficiently, with bills paid and debts collected. The steward was the one who exercised care on behalf of the owner. That is what dominion means in these two passages—Genesis, chapter one, and Psalm 8. We are the ones given responsibility for exercising care over the world and all its creatures. Having “dominion over,” or being “the steward of the world,” speaks to a close relationship to the one we call God.

At the same time, we are not God. We are the ones given dominion to care for the created order on God’s behalf. We are the ones given that responsibility, not the giver of it. We are finite, and God is infinite. We have a relationship closer to God than that of any other of God’s creations; at the same time, we are not God. There is a distance, a difference, between us. We see that difference in many ways, though perhaps one of the most obvious is our own finitude. And being finite, as the United Church faith statement, *A Song of Faith*, puts it, should be seen “as a challenge to make our lives and choices matter.”

A second thing I would observe about this picture of God creating we human beings as the beings closest to God—God does not control us. We are not puppets on a divine set of strings. God invites us to live in a particular way, hopes we shall live in a particular way. But God does not control us. In Genesis, chapter one, and this understanding is carried elsewhere in Scripture, God seeks relationship with us. The approach is invitational, not coercive. There is a trust on God’s part. In the text in Genesis, chapter one, God speaks to the human beings God has created, inviting them to have dominion. Now if we had been doing the creating, we might well have created beings who would always be obedient, always do the right thing. But, happily, we did not do the creating. And the one who created us gave us freedom, inviting us, wishing us, to use that freedom responsibly and to seek a right relationship with the Creator and with others.

But it is something we are invited to choose, indeed encouraged to choose, but not forced to choose.

A third thing about creation generally, including our creation as human beings, is that God saw what God has created as good. Indeed, there is a formula repeated after most of the acts of creation, “and God saw that it was good.” After the act of creating humankind, the final act of creation in Genesis, chapter one, we find the words “God saw everything that God had made; and indeed, it was very good.” That is an important affirmation—that all of creation, including the creation of we human beings, was something God saw as very good. I say it is an important affirmation. From time to time, and first noticeable in the period when Christianity had its beginnings almost two thousand years ago, there has been a tendency to see the material world, including our lives here on earth, as something negative, something to be gotten through in order to find some better future beyond the grave. Without in any way denying the possibilities of blessing beyond the grave, this story makes clear that the created world is gift, something very good. From time to time there has also been a related understanding that the human body, and especially our sexuality, is something negative. The notion that our bodies and our sexuality are bad, or negative, comes from this same understanding of the material world as negative. This passage from Genesis, along with others to which I could point, refutes that understanding. Life here is something to be enjoyed, not enjoyed in some exploitative way at the cost of the other members of the created order, but enjoyed as something good, in and of itself.

A fourth point about our creation in the image of God—it is humankind as a whole that is created in the image of God. In saying that I want to point to a contrast with how many other ancient societies viewed this matter. In many other ancient societies of the Mediterranean world, the monarch, or, more accurately, the king—for the rulers of those other ancient societies always

seem to have been men—the king, not everyone, but only the king, was seen to be in the image of God. Indeed, in some cultures the king was seen as divine. My point is that in these other ancient societies it was an individual who was seen to be in the image of God. But here, in Genesis, chapter one, it is humankind—all of us, the collective—that is seen to be made in the image of God. In other words, it is when we are together, in community, that we reflect God’s image. To make this point is not to deny the importance of our individuality nor to say that what we do as individuals does not matter. What we do as individuals is extremely important.

But the way Genesis, chapter one, makes this point reminds us of the importance of community and of our working together. The text reminds us that God created humankind in the image of God, male and female God created them. Male and female—both genders equally in the image of God, both valued equally, both needed to work together, in community.

And a final point, and one we may easily miss in our attention to other aspects of our being created in God’s image. After the creation of humankind, male and female both and equally in the image of God, the text tells us that “God blessed them.”

This story about our creation is also a story about God’s blessing. It is a story about a God who, as I noted earlier, does not seek to coerce. This is a God who blesses, who invites, who calls us freely, but who does not compel. When you read through this creation story that begins the Bible and that concludes just a few verses into chapter two, there is a sense of blessing that runs through the whole story. But it is named specifically in relation to the creation of humankind—“And God blessed them,” after which God spoke to them. This notion of blessing goes along with my earlier comments about God inviting us, trusting us, in this relationship with God and others, hoping and trusting that we will be good stewards of this created world. But this notion of God blessing us reminds us that God is still with us, still blessing us.

In my visits to my spouse Caroline's home over the years while her parents were still alive, I learned that the same grace was said at breakfast each day by her father. It was an old blessing, which he would say in German, but which translates as follows: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and may these gifts to us be blessed." It was a grace, or a prayer, that sought God's presence through the day and God's blessing on the gifts received—food, clothing, shelter, life itself. That grace, of blessing, seems to me to be a summary reflection of this latter portion of Genesis, chapter one. In the conclusion of that chapter, God creates humankind in God's image and for relationship with God. And then God blesses them.

May we, as those created in God's image, seek to live in right relationship with God and with each other. And to the one who made us, to the one through whom we have come that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.