

Anchored in the Storm

Message #5 – “Imago Dei: Competing Images”
Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:3-6; Mark 12:13-17; Philippians 2:5-12
St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
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²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸ And 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 heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:26-28)

³ When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?

⁵ You have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶ You made them rulers over the works of your hands... you put everything under their feet... (Psalm 8:3-6)

Made in God’s image. Made by God; made like God. No matter what else could be said about us, we ultimately derive our honor, dignity, value, significance and identity from being made in God’s image.

God’s creation took shape step by step.....light separated from darkness.....waters evaporating up into the sky clouds above; separated from waters pooling in the oceans below.....Dry land boundaries established against wind-swept shores or sheer cliffs blocking pounding waves.....The skies streaked with birds flying overhead, the land teeming with living creatures both great and small, and the deep seas and rivers pulsating with fish and aquatic animals.

Each ascending refinement receiving the divine approval: “*And God saw that it was good.*” But when God finalized his work by installing the pinnacle of his creation, man and woman – the beings created somewhat like God Himself to rule the world like He ruled the heavens and the earth, He exclaimed the completion of his work, “*very good.*” (Gn. 1:31). It was no longer just good; it was now *really* good!

Men and women made in ‘the image of God’ - among God’s great creative works of art, we are His Magnum opus, his masterpiece, his singular crowning achievement.

Though we’re not the largest, the strongest, nor the most majestic among God’s creatures –

We are key to the world reaching its full potential.

We alone can make the most of God’s world.

That places in our hands power unlike any other. Made in the image of God secures our identity and our purpose in life.

We are only aware of one occasion where Jesus used terminology reminiscent of 'image of God.' Yet, what he said on that one occasion has huge ramifications. It occurs among the many stories where his religious antagonists attempted to stump and trap him....

We begin reading in Mark 12:13, "**...they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.**" Previous to finding a common enemy in Jesus, a Pharisee would not be caught dead in the company of an Herodian. This would be as likely today as a band of Antifa members locking arms with supporters of QAnon. Like oil and water they simply don't mix. The Herodians, on the one hand, had come to terms with, compromised and cooperated with the Roman government; while, on the other hand, the Pharisees were separatists, whose very customs and lifestyles were a visible refusal to accept the Roman occupation and culture. However, opposition and hatred can sometimes make for strange bedfellows. Very strange alliances can form against a common foe.

They approach Jesus in an all-too-obvious attempt to flatter him, verse 14 reads, "**Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth**" (Mark 12:14). In other words, "Jesus, we love ya' because you're a straight-shooter. You don't mince words; you just tell it like it is." The irony of this approach is that it is, in fact, true! Jesus has integrity. Jesus doesn't play to a crowd; Jesus doesn't soft-pedal truth before the influential or the well-to-do; Jesus teaches the way of God truthfully. But, neither is Jesus blinded-sided by faint praise, and their flattery will not cause him to forget that restraint is needed to guard one's heart and tongue (Proverbs 4:23; 17:27).

They finally ask their question (or set their trap). **Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn't we?**" I imagine that they had to fight the urge to smirk, because they were so giddy knowing that their 'ingenious' question would prompt an answer that could never satisfy everyone and would definitely offend someone. A 'Yes' from Jesus would offend the Pharisee but a "No" would offend loyalists. Their trap is sprung, and they're just waiting for the hammer to fall.

Before answering, Jesus sizing up their motives: **But Jesus knew their hypocrisy.** And then, as he so often does, he answers their question with his own question: **"Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked.** You see, Jesus saw that this group were not men of integrity; they were very much swayed by others, because they paid too much attention to who their audience's views; they were unreliable guides because their truth was based on opinion polls. *They were the very opposite of what they said they prized in Jesus!* But Jesus has an answer for them, just not from among the choices they naively anticipated.

"Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." It's almost as if Jesus checks all his pockets, patting them down, only to come up empty-handed. These coins, which were ubiquitous across the Roman empire? Jesus didn't even have one. And Jesus doesn't only not have one on him, he acts as if he can't recall what they even look like. He asks, "Could you bring me one to inspect?"

¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"



Although Jesus originally implied that he needed a refresher course to familiarize himself with what the coin actually looked like, he makes his questioners inspect the coin and describe to him what they find. **"Caesar's," they replied.' (Mk 12:16).** The coin contained the image or 'icon' of Caesar and it read "Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus." Caesar's image and inscription amounted to a claim to being god. For all practical intents and purposes, Caesar had the power and right to do as he pleased, to take a life or spare it – his citizens owed all they had to him.

17 Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him. (Mark 12:13-17)

Jesus' answer provides a third unanticipated alternative. Jesus' answer limits what his 'yes' might imply and augments what his 'no' entails. He could be saying, "Look, for the provision and protection the government provides, you can pay your share in taxes; however, since you yourselves bear the image of God, you owe your very lives to God. Or, His answer can be taken as having a little more dismissive tone to it, something like, "It has *his* image on it, then give it back to *him*...but let those who bear the image of God let them give themselves back to God."

So, let me ask you, whose image are you? Or for that matter, when you look at other human beings, whose image do you see?



Looking at these three, whose image do you see? Okay, well, two out of three were obvious (just kidding). They all reflect God's image.

In fact, it's not a bad practice when you stand in front of the mirror to look at yourself and ask, "Whose image is this?" But be careful...That's a loaded question! The answer is weighted with worth, value, significance, identity but also power, responsibility and purpose. Looking at your image in a mirror should be a religious experience!

**Look in the mirror. Ask yourself, "Whose image is this?"
The image you reflect has revolutionary potential!**

What this interchange between Jesus and his challengers reveals is an underlying but crucial idea. There are **competing images** out there.

'Caesar is Lord.' 'Jesus is Lord.' These were the two stark rival claims of the New Testament era. In a sense, all of us, as image bearers of God Himself have a choice to make between two ways that we can '**play-act**' God. We can use our 'god-like' identity and power for our own benefit; or we can mimic how God himself executes His power for the sake of others' sake. There is a way to use power to help others benefit and flourish. We see this in the original creation story, but it becomes unmistakably clear when we look at the life of Jesus, God's truest image bearer.

Theologian Owen Strachan says, "This is the question of our age." He spells it out:

**Does the human person
live in an ordered cosmos and have an appointed identity,
or do we make our own identity in a world without God?"**

Today, many people choose to act as if God doesn't exist, or as if He is irrelevant to everyday life. Left to themselves, they don't see their identity as derived from an all-powerful God who graciously made them and sustains them moment-by-moment. Instead, they see their origins as shrouded in mystery, simply as accidents of history with no backstory. So, they stand at the center of their world, writing their own rules, accountable to no one but themselves and acting as if their greatest need is to be at peace within. They play God as master of their own destiny. That image of self-independence and self-rule is a false image of life and reality.

Others of us see ourselves with God-rightfully as the center of the world. He is acknowledged as Creator, He designs life and gets to write the rules, we're accountable to God and we see our greatest need is to find peace with Him.

These basic foundational convictions about life are like rudders that steer the course of our lives. If the question of our age is "Am I given a God-defined identity or must I make up my own?" Then, for those of us who answer that God made us and He defines us as like himself in his image, the follow-up question before us is:

**Will I use my God-defined identity
to accomplish my God-given purpose
in God-like fashion?**

An easy way to understand this basic choice is to look at the difference between dogs and cats. [As a disclaimer, I apologize beforehand if anyone is offended by the stereotyped portrayals of cats and dogs that I use in this illustration. No actual names of felines or canines, either living or deceased, will be used... to protect the innocent.] The caption reads: "I was a dog in a previous life, but I came back as a god." The dog is seated, in submissive pose giving full attention to the cat, who is perched atop the couch and rather smugly explains that he is now a god (=a cat). You see, when a god walks into church and is greeted, welcomed, embraced and loved, and he concludes, 'Wow, God must be here!' But when a cat strolls into church and is greeted, welcomed, embrace and loved, he concludes, "Wow, I must be god!" Being made in the image of God gives us high value and a unique position of power to choose and impact life. Will we



"I was a dog in a previous life, but I came back as a god."

live as if we are god or as a servant of that God?

God, so to speak, provides the design or contours of how to live as His image (we see it reflected in the creation story). But God also provides us with a 'floor model' so to speak when He appeared in living color and in-the-flesh when He lived on earth as Jesus Christ. Jesus was called by the biblical writers: **'the image of the invisible God,' 'the exact imprint of his [God's] nature' (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3; 2 Corinthians 4:4).** And, in God becoming man, we see what true humanity is all about. We see in him the prime example of using his power to make the most of the world. Jesus provides us with a template for the purpose of our lives; how to use our power to make the world around us flourish.

We're all familiar with the declaration attributed to Lord Acton: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This statement is warning of the downside of power. However, when you come to think of it, no human authority is entirely absolute in authority and power in this world. All power is ultimately derived from God. Only He can be said to exercise absolute power. Even at his trial before Pilate, when Pilate was a bit baffled by Jesus' silence, and he asked him if he realized that he possessed the power to have him executed, Jesus reiterated the biblical truth, that **"there is no authority except that which God has established."** (see John 19:11; Matt 28:18; Rom 13:1-7; Dan 5:21b). In reality, the only true absolute power and authority belongs to God. So, the question we bring to Jesus' life is: 'when God becomes a man, how does he show his absolute rule and absolute power?

Shockingly, here is how absolute power is exercised:

....Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

He, who was God, used his exalted status not to his own advantage, but rather as a position from which **to give** for the good of others. That is the very nature of our Savior. And, that is a perfect reflection of our Creator (Heb 1:3) for "the moral character of God is supremely seen in Christ." The Apostle Paul states that, **"He was God in very nature...but, He took the very nature of a servant. He was equal to God...but, He made himself nothing.**

The Apostle Paul uses the boldest, starkest terms. The Almighty Ruler became a servant; the All-in-All became nothing. That is the type of humble, self-denying, other-focused model we are called to follow. Let us not forget the introductory line to this description: *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus..." (Philippians 2:5)* Jesus' path from heaven above to the earth, from the earth to the cross, from the cross to the grave is set before us as an example to follow.

What might you give so that another flourishes?

We see in the Creation Story that the God whom we are to reflect as his image is the Ruler over a world teeming with life with the potential for abundance of life. In Jesus we see the path leading to abundant life for others. **Power shapes and creates an environment where creatures can flourish. Love transfigures power through service. Absolute power loves absolutely.**

I wanted to share an application that I have made for myself in living this out. Believe me, this is a mere baby-step. It has to do with what I've attempted to do regarding racism.

I grew up in New York and have had black friends from junior high through college. But although I never held views of superiority, what I've learned from my black friends is that they do not want me to reassure them that I'm color-blind, that their differences make no difference to me. What they want me to do is to be aware of their differences – the different treatment they receive elsewhere, the different treatment their children receive. If I love them, I'll listen to their stories, I'll cry with them when their naturally vivacious and care-free 4-year-old daughter is upstairs whimpering into her pillow after being told by a pre-school classmate that her family wouldn't allow her to come to her birthday party because they never have people at their house with skin as dark as hers. They're not loved best by me assuring them that I'm ignoring their differences. I love them by listening, becoming aware of fears, prejudices that still are alive and well in our communities and which they and their children experience. Look, all of our children will experience being left out, or excluded, they'll all know that heartbreak, but none of my kids will ever have to deal with their skin color being a cause of different treatment.

This is a situation where image-bearers are not given a hearing. Actually, I should say a *personal* hearing. I know that some of us have felt like, 'I can't even watch a sporting event anymore without these issues being shoved down my throat. Separate politics from sports!' I get it, I'm talking about something different. Being involved in the lives of my 'different friends' – friends with thick accents, friends with emotional issues, friends with learning disabilities, those who are often marginalized, getting to know their stories and perspectives. I'm talking about taking the small step of having a personal, individual interaction, a friendship with someone you grow to care about, listen to, ask questions of, etc. Sometimes small steps are huge leaps for mankind.

What might you give so that another flourishes?

To conclude our discussion on identity and purpose as 'image-bearers' of God, consider these two challenges:

**Do you believe that the creative powers of creation
are still alive and active in the world today?**

**Do you believe that the resurrection of Jesus
is the start of a new creation that God is bringing?**

**Will I use my God-defined identity
to accomplish my God-given purpose
in God-like fashion?**

Join me in a prayer of the New Creation believer.....

Lord, what do You need me to see, what do You need me to hear, what do You need me to know, what do You need me to do?

Lord, who do You need me to see, who do you need me to hear, who do You need me to know?

I am your servant in Jesus's name. Amen.