

Anchored in the Storm

Message #6 – “Imago Dei: Seeing God’s Image in Others”
Matthew 28:18-20; 22:37-40; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:13-20; 2 Corinthians 5:20

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
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And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:18-20 NRSV

Hello. Welcome once again to St. Paul’s Church and thank you for joining us for this worship service on paper. My name is Matt Skillen and I have the humble joy of sharing God’s word with you today. I’d like to open with the lyrics of one of my favorite worship songs, entitled: ‘The Blessing.’ It is on in my house or the car when I am driving to and from work nearly every day. It is a simple song, but it packs a powerful punch.

Listen to the words...have you ever said the words of this song to someone else? I know it might seem odd or out of character saying this to someone, but I invite you to listen one more time to the words of this song and allow your mind to picture someone who needs to hear these words today.

The Lord bless you
And keep you
Make His face shine upon you
And be gracious to you
The Lord turn His
Face toward you
And give you peace.

May His favor be upon you
And a thousand generations
And your family and your children
And their children, and their children

Who came to mind? Was it someone in the same room as you? Maybe it was someone you see at work or school... Perhaps it was your boss or the person who bagged your groceries the last time you were at the store. Why not make a phone call to convey this truly powerful sentiment—may our limitless God be limitless in your life and in the lives of those who will follow you. May He with boundless love and grace be boundless in your life so that you may see God seeing you.

Tell me, would you be blessed by this kind of blessing in your life?

As your affirmations arise from living rooms, bedrooms, offices and waiting rooms, wherever you are reading this message today, I pray the presence of God is with you in this moment. That his favor is truly upon you and in Christ Jesus you find peace.

What we can recognize in moments like these is that God is restoring us routinely. He is in the restoration business. Isn't it remarkable how a few words strung together can have a lasting and healing impact? And while a blessing like this is easy to convey to people we love and admire, it is not always easy to say something like this to someone we see as a stranger or as an adversary. In a culture that seems, on the surface of the cable news and social media, to be divided and hostile it would seem odd and out of character for us to find the people that we shouldn't or can't agree with and open our dialogue with, a blessing.

However, just as we are called to seek the God-defined identity in ourselves, Scripture places a higher demand on us. In Christ we are called to see the redeemed, God-defined identity in others—in strangers or people who don't look like us and even in those we call "the enemy" or "the problem". As we are redeemed and made whole through Christ, as we are made in God's image, we are meant to go out to the nations to those who, in all their wondrous diversity, bear God's image in a multitude of ways.

As we open God's word this morning, please join me for a moment of prayer. And, as we go before the Lord, let us appeal to him that our hearts are prepared for what he would have us hear today.

Lord, as we search our hearts today, tell us what do You need us to see? What do You need us to hear? What do You need us learn? What do You need us to do? Who do You need us to see? Who do You need us to hear? Who do You need us to know? We are Your servants. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Last week, Pastor John explored our theme "Anchored in the Storm" through the lens of the creation story, how God placed his image in us. It is the God-defined identity that defines us. And while we wrestle our larger identity issues, I wonder, when things seem chaotic, when we are in conflict with one another **do we look for God's image in others?** If we did, how different would our culture be?

I think we are living in truly unique times when it seems really, really difficult to find unity with one another. While politicians and community leaders will attempt to rally us around their ideas of justice and fairness, we are often more divided as a result. While I think these are usually valiant efforts from pure and patriotic intentions, scripture shows us there is something, actually someone, much larger than ideas that will ultimately unite us.

Here is something that has been revealed to me, and it may have been revealed to you throughout everything we've been through together this past year. The world is full of distractions. And, we are distractable. Throughout this series Pastor David, Pastor John and I have invited all of us to seek the very face of God, particularly in times of chaos when the fog of sin, confusion, war and injustice clouds and distorts everything we see and hear. In those moments when certainty doesn't seem certain in this world we have an anchor in the storm, and his name is Jesus.

As followers of Christ we are called to not only embrace the God-defined identity in us, but we are also called to share God's remarkable Gospel with others. In doing so, those who hear the Gospel might find the God-defined identity in themselves. This takes the entire conversation of our relationship with God up to a new level and some of you reading today may bristle and buckle at the idea of talking to others about religion. "I mean come on Pastor Matt, you just explained how divisive the entire world is right now..."

In today's message we are going to take a look at three different references from the Apostle Paul's letters to new Christians that he disciplined during his ministry. Paul's letters are filled with timeless wisdom that while they spoke to a particular group of people in a specific context, they also speak to us in our context. My hope is that through these few references you'll begin to see this entire dynamic a little differently. You'll begin to see what I saw recently:

Everyone, everyone deserves a blessing.

The first provocation you might say in response to the call to bless others, to share your love of Jesus with them is something I have felt or said aloud several times in my life in response to this call. **"God, I just don't understand them."** Whoever "them is." There is a real fear or anxiety when we begin to reach out to others for Christ, and if I am being honest, I think this sentiment is a fear of difference. When speaking to the Galatian church, Paul dismantles a false teaching that had been delivered to this new church that there was some 'holy hierarchy'. That Jews were somehow closer to Jesus than any other culture because Jesus was a Jew. But Paul says very clearly in his letter to the Galatians that,

***There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ
Jesus.***
Galatians 3:28 NRSV

What Paul is saying in this one slice of scripture is that we need to forget the social and political hierarchy when it comes to understanding the value in each person. You see at this time not only were certain cultures deemed more worthy of Christ's forgiveness, but men and women, just as slaves and free people, were on different planes. Paul dismantles all of this and it's as if he is saying, perhaps modernized a little for our culture, there are no republicans or democrats, blue states or red states, there is no longer male or female, black or white because all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And because we are one, together, perhaps we can look after one another, too.

Teaching his disciples, Jesus says

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.
Matthew 22:37-40

These are the two greatest commandments. Everything we need to know in our life with Christ comes down to these two things: Loving God with all that we have and loving our neighbors. If we are one in Christ, we are one together. Just as we are to love God with all of who we are, so too our neighbor is called to love God. Just as we are called to love our neighbor, so too our neighbor is called to love us. Do you see how powerful these two commandments are? Do you see how these two commandments can work together? Are you like me, when you zoom out for just a moment, you can see how absolutely transformational these two commandments can be to a culture that is plagued by division?

Just as we are one, together; love of God and love for one another will help us build the foundation we need to find common ground.

The second thing you might say, you might even be thinking it right now. "Pastor Matt. I don't know. **I think the differences between me and the people around me are too different.**" Yeah, I hear ya'. For weeks and months, I've felt the very same thing you are feeling. There were times when everything I heard in some settings seemed diametrically opposed to everything I believe to be true. A great wall or great canyon had formed between me and everyone else in the room. And it seemed to me in those moments that nothing would ever bring us back together. There are still times in certain settings where I can feel a growing divide between groups of people and when those times come, I am reminded of the remarkable thing Christ did for us. Again, returning to one of Paul's letters, this time from book of Ephesians,

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...

Ephesians 2:13-20 NRSV

Though we may seem different. We may hold different political views or beliefs. These are not the things that define us. Christ came. He died for our sins. Though we were far away, he brought us closer to him. As the word says, God broke down the levies and bluffs that separated us from him when Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Jesus's life, death and resurrection serves as the uniting force in this life with him. Regardless of who you are or what you think you have done, all of us were marked for death. The sin in our lives set us all apart from God; this created a great chasm between us and him. We were all adrift at sea in need of a lifeboat. But Christ's great sacrifice served as our redemption. And if we profess to believe in the salvation he brings, then it is also up to us to see his great redemption in others. The walls and divides that we have created between one another can be dismantled and bridged over. Though it may look rough out there. It isn't over. There is so much more we have yet to do together.

You might also ask, "Pastor Matt, where do I start?"

The start, is already in you.

***So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.
2 Corinthians 5:20 NRSV***

When I think of an ambassador I think of those who serve in civil service abroad. They represent their home country in a completely different place. Ambassadors leave everything that is familiar behind them and they appeal, on behalf of their home country, in an entirely different place with different languages and social rules. Everything, everything is unfamiliar. It is a remarkable work, and it is a work we are called to do here on Earth for Christ. As followers of Jesus we are called to love one another, to be reconciled, to seek every opportunity to be a light for Christ in our daily lives. Maybe we have to leave the places that are familiar and go to the places that seem unfamiliar. I am not necessarily talking about moving to a different city or a different country, but maybe we go to places that are beyond what know to be comfortable. Maybe, just maybe, you can start with where we started our time together today. With a blessing. And as you consider where you might go, let me complete the rest of the song.

May His presence go before you
And behind you, and beside you
All around you and within in you
He is with you, He is with you

In the morning, in the evening
In your coming, and your going
In your weeping, and rejoicing
He is for you, He is for you.

Amen. Amen.