

Made in God's Image

[Genesis 1:26-31](#)

Discipleship Essentials - Part Two: Understanding the Message of Christ

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Second Sunday in Lent; worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

As our opening and closing prayers this morning, I will be using paraphrased versions of theologian J. Philip Newell's Celtic Prayers from Iona. May we bow in prayer.

Thanks be to you, O God, that we have risen this day. To the rising of this life itself. May it be a day of blessing. O God of every gift, a day of new beginnings given. Help us to avoid every sin. And the source of every sin to forsake. And as the mist scatters from the crest of the hills, may each ill haze clear from our souls, O God. Amen.

I'm beginning with an easy question—how many of you looked in at least one mirror before you came to worship this morning? There should be close to 100 percent response. How many times each day do we look in a mirror to see our reflections? And how many times do we note that those reflections are also God's image?

Imago Dei means that humans have been created in the image or likeness of God. Thus, we represent God on earth; we reflect him (Moltmann, *Creation*, 219). "To be an image of something always means letting that something—in this case, God—appear, and revealing it" (Moltmann, *Creation*, 219). We are meant to reflect God's love in our relationships with one another, we all are tied together in community, reflecting a God who is communal, and we have our very being in God (Moltmann, *Creation*, 230), lighting up with the glory of God.

The image functions to mirror God to the world, to be God as God would be to the non-human, to be an extension of God's own dominion. In the ancient Near East, the king as image of God was a designated representative of the gods, ruling on their behalf. Genesis 1 democratizes this royal image so that all humanity belongs to their sphere, and inter-human hierarchical understandings of the image are set aside. That both male and female are so created means that the female images the divine as much as the male does. Both are addressed in the command of v. 28. The reference to both implies that their roles in life are not identical, and that likeness to God pertains not only to what they have in common, but also to what remains distinctive about them (the emergence of both male and female images for God could be grounded in this text) (Fretheim, 345).

In our image. Paradoxically, the human image resembles imageless divinity in some respect— perhaps speech, reason, or morality. But biblical narrative was not hesitant to depict divine manifestation in human form, male and female. Both man and woman are created in the image of God, who is beyond gender or comprises both (Meeks, 7).

The climax of the six days of creation is the creation of humankind on day six, which differs from the other days in God's prior consultation of the heavenly court. The context suggests that humanity is the image of God to the dominion it exercises over the rest of creation. Ancient Near Eastern parallels suggest that "image of God" is a royal designation, emphasizing the godlike nature of the ruling monarch. In the imageless religious tradition of Israel, the only acceptable image of God is the human being (Mays, 87).

Do we see the "face of God" in the man who jumped onto the New York City subway train tracks to save a man having an epileptic seizure?

What the phrase, "in our image, after our likeness" (1:26), signifies is difficult to determine. Generally, it is taken to mean that man receives from God a divine stamp which differentiates him/ her from the animals. Although humans have much in common with the animals, they are far superior to them because of their special relation to their Maker, and humans are given dominion over the other animals (1:28). More specifically, we can say that humans are made for fellowship with God. We can think God's thoughts after him, and enjoy him forever (Fritsch, 25-26).

But the Hebrew word for "image" means more than spiritual resemblance or self-conscious reason. Literally, it means "something that is cut out," as, for example, the "image" of a heathen god. And so it suggests something concrete and substantial in form and appearance. This basic meaning of the word cannot be ignored in this passage. Throughout the history of Israel, God's form is seen by men in visions and appearances of various kinds. It was that form which God stamped upon humans at the creation. The substantial nature of this image is further confirmed by Genesis 5:3, which states that "he [Adam] became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, which can only mean that the image received by Adam from God at creation is passed on from one generation to another. The image of God in man, which was marred by sin, is revealed in perfect clarity in the Incarnation, in the person of Jesus Christ. The very fact that man was created in the divine image shows the possibility of God's becoming flesh and dwelling among us (Fritsch, 25-26). In the very center of our text (vv. 26-29), the liturgy makes a bold confession. Amidst the polemics of the sixth century, this poem discloses that the peculiar affinity of God and humankind helps us understand both parties in new ways. The creator is "humanized" as the one who cares in costly ways for the world (cf. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*). The creature is seen as the one who is entrusted with power and authority to rule. The text is revolutionary. It presents an inverted view of God, not as the one who reigns by fiat and remoteness, but as the one who governs by gracious self-giving. It also presents an inverted view of humanness. This man and woman are not the chattel and servants of God, but the agents of God to whom much is given and from whom much is expected (cf. Luke 12:48). The creation will be misunderstood if we hold to old and conventional religious notions of God and of humankind. The miracle and celebration is in the disclosure of a quite new understanding of both (Brueggemann, 33).

The statement of verse 27 is not an easy one, but it is worth noting that humankind is spoken of as singular (“he created him”) and plural (“he created them”). This peculiar formula makes an important affirmation. On the one hand, humankind is a single entity. All human persons stand in solidarity before God. But on the other hand, humankind is a community, male and female. And none is the full image of God alone. Only in community of humankind is God reflected. God is, according to this bold affirmation, not mirrored as an individual, but as a community (Brueggemann, 34).

Do we see *imago Dei* in the person at the hypothermia outreach shelter in Alexandria who offers a blessing to those of us who are serving the evening meal?

As Christians, we will interpret and hear this text in terms of Jesus of Nazareth, who is confessed as “the image of God” (cf. Cor. 4:4, Col. 1:15). Jesus’ identity as God’s image on earth is evident in his readiness to turn from himself toward creation and toward his fellow creatures. Specifically, attention may be given to Phil. 2:1-11, which speaks of the form rather than the image. It is on the basis of Jesus’ “form of God” that Paul appeals for unity and fidelity in the church: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy...Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Brueggemann, 34).

Apparently, the key mark of Jesus in the image/form of God is that he did not grasp after equality with God but became obedient. God is the one who does not grasp. And humans in his image are those who do not grasp. Grasping power cannot create. Grasping power cannot enhance creation. (Brueggemann, 34).

In Jesus Christ, we are offered a new discernment of who God is and of who humankind is called to be. The striking feature of Jesus is that he did not look after his own interests, but always after the interests of others. That is an echo of God’s act of creation. Creation is God’s decision not to look after himself but to focus his energies and purposes on the creation (Brueggemann, 34).

And as Jesus models a new disclosure of God, so he also embodies a call for a new human community. Paul urges an abandonment of the old life for an embrace of the new. “Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts...put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24). The idea of the “image of God” in Gen. 1:26-29 and in Jesus of Nazareth is not an idea which lives in a cosmological vacuum. It is an explicit call to form a new kind of human community in which the members, after the manner of the gracious God, are attentive in calling each other to full being in fellowship (Brueggemann, 34-35).

Sometimes, we find ourselves being perceived as *imago Dei*. Once, when I was visiting an NPC member in the hospital, wearing my clerical collar, a hospital staff member delivering dinner to the patient beckoned to me across the room. He asked if I would pray for him and his faith. I asked his name and promised I would pray for him.

It is plausible that the language of Gen. 1:26-31 reflects an old rubric for enthronement. In such monarchical societies, it is the ruler who images God. But in the Christian tradition, every person is the “new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17), crowned king/queen, entrusted with self-giving rule for the sake of others. The rule of the queen/king is to practice gracious freedom towards others which lets them be, even as the Creator does toward us (Brueggemann, 35).

As God’s image, human beings represent God on earth. As his similitude, they reflect him. It would be one-sided if we were to see the likeness to God as consisting solely in the divine commission to rule. The human being is God’s indirect manifestation on earth. To be an image of something always means letting that something appear, and revealing it (Moltmann, 219).

The God who allows his glory to light up his image on earth and to shine forth from that image is reflected in human beings as in a mirror. Theological tradition has always understood God’s image as a mirror-reflection of God himself. The God who allows himself to be represented on earth by His image also appears in that image. And the image becomes an indirect revelation of His divine Being in earthly form. So, as God’s image and appearance on earth, human beings are involved in three fundamental relationships: they rule over other earthly creatures as God’s representatives and in his name; they are God’s counterpart on earth, the counterpart to whom He wants to talk, and who is intended to respond to him, and they are the appearance of God’s splendor, and his glory on earth (Moltmann, 220-221).

Several years ago, I offered to pray with a hospice patient and asked if she had something special for which to pray. She hesitated, saying, “I’m not sure if we should pray for this.” My interest was piqued. It evolved that her adult son had been paid in cash for work he had done, had put the \$600 in a mostly-unmarked envelope, and the envelope had fallen out of his pocket onto the streets of Old Town Alexandria as he continued his work. I truly believed, at that moment, that there was very little likelihood that the \$600 would be found and returned. What I prayed was that someone would find the money and return it—somehow—or that whoever found the money would really need it and would use it for a good purpose. A couple of hours after I left the patient’s home, I received a phone call from her daughter, who said, “You have a direct line to God.” I was tearful as the daughter reported that a young man had found the money, had somehow figured out to which office it belonged, had returned all of the money, and had refused a reward, saying, “I’ll get my reward later.” Surely, the image of God was in that young man.

Only the human being is *imago Dei*. Neither animals nor angels, neither the forces of nature nor the powers of fate, may be either feared or worshipped as God’s image or his appearance or his revelation. The Old Testament prohibition of images also protects the dignity of human beings as God’s one and only image (Moltmann, 221).

If we start from God’s relationship to human beings, then what makes the human being God’s image is not his possession of any particular characteristic or other—something which distinguishes him above other creatures. It is his whole existence. The whole person, not merely his soul; the true human community, not only the individual; humanity as it is bound up with nature, not simply human beings in their confrontation with nature—it is these which are the image of God and his glory. This does away with the

question about particular phenomena constituting the image of God (Moltmann, 221).

Yet, according to the biblical traditions, there is apparently one point at which God's relationship to human beings is manifested and can be recognized: the human face. It is the human face which becomes the mirror of God: "But now we all with unveiled face reflect the glory of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18). It is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). "Now we see through a mirror in a word hard to interpret but then face to face (1 Cor. 13:12). After Moses had looked upon the glory of God on the mountain, "his face shone" so unendurably for the people that he had to cover it with a veil (Exodus 34: 33-35). When Jesus was "transfigured" on the mountain "his face shone like the sun" (Matthew 17:2). And we are told (Rev. 1:16) about the coming Judge of the world that "his face was like the sun shining in full strength."

"The face of God" is a commonly-used symbol for God's turning to men and women in kindness, for his attentive mindfulness and his purposefully directed presence. The whole person is known first of all in his committed attention, and in his open eyes and his attentive face. The play of emotions is reflected in the face, and a person's "heart" is best expressed in his face; and the same is true of the glory of God, when it is perceived in the face of Christ and when it is reflected a thousandfold in the faces of the men and women who behold and recognize it. Whatever else may be called "the seat" of the divine likeness, whether it be the soul or the upright posture, domination or community, it is expressed in concentrated form in the person's face. That is why the human being's original designation to be God's image already implies the eschatological promise of perceived God "face to face" (Moltmann, 221-222).

The images and likeness of God exist in communal being. How do we reflect our belief in God in social relationships with others? (Moltmann, Creation, 233).

The cartoon strip, "For Better or For Worse," recently had a story line showing the grandfather, who has had a stroke and cannot speak, leaning on his walker and looking out the window at a very dark, gloomy, snowy day. Suddenly, there is a knock on the door and his granddaughter, April, comes in to visit. She regales her grandfather and his wife with chatter about her life, with hugs and kisses. As she leaves later, the grandfather's wife says, "Thanks for the magic, April...Today, you made the sun shine."

As imago Dei, let each of us, every single day of our lives, shine forth the love of God. Let us pray. In the beginning, O God, You shaped our souls and set their weave. You formed our bodies and gave them breath. Renew us this day in the image of your love. O great God, grant us your light. O great God, grant us your grace. O great God, grant us your joy this day. And let us be made pure in the well of your health. Amen.

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