

Created in Relationship

For the past few weeks on Wednesday nights at “Soup, Salad & Soul,” we’ve been discussing some of the stories in the early chapters of Genesis. We’ll be continuing with the series this coming Wednesday night when we take up the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 and I suspect that we’ll be spending the summer in that book. This study of Genesis has been motivated by a couple of factors. For one, I’ve heard a couple of comments in the last year to the effect of, “I don’t remember this story in the Bible,” or “I didn’t remember that was in this story.” I thought it might be fun to look at some of the stories we all think we know as well as some that are pretty obscure to see what we could find. The other factor is the lectionary. We are now in Year A of the three year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary and that means that all the Sunday readings this summer from the Old Testament come from Genesis and Exodus. As I looked at the schedule, I wondered what sorts of insights we might find together in a little back and forth between Sunday morning preaching and Wednesday night Bible study. There won’t be an exact correspondence but the two streams of study should cross and interact enough for us to get a deeper experience in combination than we usually can.

So, as I prepared this sermon this week, I took a little different approach from what I usually do. Normally, I spend a good chunk of Thursday and Friday reading commentaries, articles, blogs and other sermons based on the text or texts from which I intend to preach. This week, I spent much of that time doing other tasks and spent other time reflecting on the discussion around this passage that took place a few weeks ago. I doubt that I will do justice to the deep and vigorous conversation that took place around the tables in Fellowship Hall. We have, after all, a bright, curious and theologically sophisticated congregation, so the Wednesday night discussion had both scope and depth. And, as you all know, my memory is notoriously faulty. So, I’m not going to try to summarize that conversation or quote any of you. Instead, I’ve tried to let your questions and observations inform my own consideration of this passage and what you will hear this morning is the result of those musings.

This morning, I won’t cover all of the first creation story in Genesis, the ending of which is obscured by the sometimes arbitrary division of the Bible into chapters and verses by Archbishop Steven Cardinal Langton in the 13th Century. Instead, I want to focus this morning on the part of the story concerning the creation of humankind and, as you might have guessed, the Trinitarian implications of those verses. What does it mean for us to be created in God’s image? To whom is God speaking upon announcing that humankind will be created in “our image”? How can the sometimes confusing doctrine of the Trinity reveal something important not only about God but about ourselves?

There have been, of course, a huge number of opinions on just what it means for a creature of flesh and blood to be created in the image of a Creator who is pure Spirit. Some that have been popular at various times in various places, we now reject out of hand; the contention that men were created first because God is intrinsically male, for example. But there is much to be said for many of the other interpretations – that we humans show the image of God in our free will, or in our self-awareness, or in our ability to discern right from wrong, or in our inclination to seek and to recognize the divine.

As an artist and advocate for the arts, I’ve always been partial to the idea that the image of God is revealed in humankind through our own creative abilities. This line of thought points out that

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the very first thing we learn about God in the Holy Scriptures, and therefore one of the most important, is that God is Creator; Creator of heaven and Earth and all that is within them. Surely, the theory goes, since this is the preeminent thing we learn about God and, indeed, the only thing we learn about God prior to the creation of humanity, then being made in the image of God must be about being made as creative beings. We, of course, cannot create *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, as God does. But the work of the imagination seems to come as close to the miraculous as any work of a creature can. Who, after all, can understand the subconscious, the deep wellspring of the imagination? Where do ideas come from? Although literary, performance and visual arts, or for that matter, the creative and imaginative arts of the sciences, lose some of their mystery when we study their craft, understand their antecedents, realize how conditioned our thought processes are by our experience, there is nevertheless an abiding sense of inscrutability surrounding the genesis of our own creative acts, no pun intended. This sense that creative works of the imagination reveal the divine spark in *homo sapiens* led the arts group at Crescent Hill Baptist Church some years ago to name their collective, “creators,” always spelled with a small “c.” We thought in part that disallowing the capital letter might help keep our enormous artistic egos in some check.

But as comfortable as I might find the “human as secondary creator” concept, I want to set it aside for this morning to pursue another idea of what it might mean to be created in God’s image. To get to that idea, we’ll need to return to one of the other questions I asked at the outset: To whom is God speaking upon announcing that humankind will be created in “our image”?

Again, there have been a multitude of theories about this over the ages and this is a topic that was discussed with great vigor at “Soup, Salad & Soul.” One answer to the question, popular among a certain school of scholars, is that this reference is a left-over from an older version of the story. Every ancient culture, after all, has its own mythical explanation for the creation of the world and of our species. The neighbors of the Children of Israel, those with whom they traded, fought or intermarried, would have had their own legends; we have good evidence for the Babylonian version. So, the theory goes, the first story in Genesis is simply the adoption of a common tale by the wandering Hebrews, who then put their own unique, monotheistic twist on it. For reasons now unknown to us, these scholars say, the story retained the feature of the particular god responsible for making humankind in conference with his or her brothers and sisters in the pantheon. Ultimately, though, this is an explanation which explains nothing. If the storytellers were so intent on changing a known tale into a monotheistic manifesto, why would they not change these few crucial words? Why would this oddity be retained over the centuries of oral transmission and into the written and finally edited version of Torah?

A slightly more convincing explanation is that God is here speaking to the Heavenly Host, to the angels, and employing the “Royal We,” as in Queen Victoria’s famous remark, “We are not amused.” Our psalm this morning might give this interpretation some support: “you have made us a little lower than the angels.” The problem, though, is that the angels are not mentioned in any other part of the story, which is otherwise so careful about tracing the creation of all things by God.

As I was researching this passage a few weeks ago, I came upon a suggestion that is eminently practical and reasonable. It derives from the sometimes arcane science of grammar and I won’t

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attempt to give you the proper grammatical name of the construction. The argument, however, goes like this: Sometimes when we are in the midst of a hectic and trying task or schedule, we utter little encouragements to ourselves in the second person plural. I'll bet you've all done it, even if you don't realize it. As I read about this idea, I could almost hear myself hurrying from task to task or applying force to some recalcitrant inanimate object and muttering "Come on, Boyer, let's get this done." "Let's get this done" – "Let us make man;" apparently, the construction is common to most languages. Who knew?

But I've left for last the explanation that most of us, as Trinitarian Christians, would consider the most obvious and most convincing: that God the Father is here in consultation with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. There is even a hint of this in verse 2 in translations like the one I cited last week: "the Spirit of God brooded over the waters." As people of the New Testament, who have grown up hearing of "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit," these seem like clear references to the different persons of our Three-in-One God.

If we follow the idea of the presence of this concept in this first chapter of the Bible, we can reach some important conclusions. First of all, we learn at the very outset of the Scriptures not only that God is Creator but also that God contains, within the very essence of God's own being, loving relationship. The reference of "us" and "our" in Genesis 1:26 is a foreshadowing of the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John. When Jesus speaks of God as Father and himself as Son and promises the coming of the Comforter, he is describing the core truth about the identity of God: God is in loving relationship. As the great German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann writes, "When we hear the names, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, we sense that in the mystery of God there must be a wondrous community." Moltmann also affirms, "It is only from the perspective of the Trinitarian God that we can claim that "God is Love," because love is never alone."

We can also surmise that creation happens because of God's desire for further relationship. God's impetus to create is to share love not only within God's own self but also with a world and creatures totally dependent upon God for their existence. If we, therefore, are to realize the image of God within us, we must look to the fulfillment of loving relationship, not only with God but with each other and with all of creation.

We are created in relationship with the rest of creation. The story of the creation of human beings is contextualized in Genesis with the story of the rest of creation. Humankind does not exist in a vacuum and we have God-given responsibilities as regards the rest of creation. God gives marching orders to humankind right up front. In our NRSV translation, verse 28 of chapter one reads: "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.'" The language may sound a little aggressive to us and certainly it's been used to justify human abuse of natural resources. But the Hebrew word used in "fill the earth" also carries the connotation of bringing the earth to fulfillment, of nurturing our planet until it reaches it's first, best destiny. We find the renewal of this concept in Paul's letter to the Romans, when he writes of how all of creation waits eagerly for humankind to be revealed in Christ as the children of God, thus freeing all of creation from its bondage to decay. And the Hebrew verb "subdue" literally means "to walk on." Certainly this came in

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Hebrew and in English to have the connotation of “trampling on,” of treating the object as something worthy only for the wiping of our feet, but what if we go back to the plain sense of the words? What if we understand God’s command here to simply be that humans should spread themselves all over the glorious planet, exploring and delighting in its diversity? Yes, God gave humankind dominion over the planet and its creatures, but is this not to be the same kind of dominion that God exercises, a dominion of love?

It is also clear in this first of the creation stories in Genesis that we are created to be in relationship with each other. There is less reason to interpret here, as compared to the story in Genesis 2 & 3, that there is any inequality intended among humans. From the very first, we are told, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” But even in the second creation story, when woman is taken out of the first-created man, we should discard any notion of priority of timing giving priority of place. In our NRSV, Genesis 2:18 speaks of a helper and partner for the man. Those of you who grew up reading or hearing the King James Version may remember the archaic word, “helpmeet.” As Robert Alter writes in his new translation of the Torah entitled, “The Five Books of Moses,” the Hebrew phrase is notoriously difficult to translate. Alter points to some root meanings and derivations, however, that would lead me to say that God created for ‘*Adam*, “an ally to stand alongside him.” Again, if we consider the concept that being in the image of God means that we are meant to exist in loving relationship, just as God does within Godself, then we can see that we are supposed to live with one another, men and women, parents and children, friends, neighbors and strangers, in equality, respect and love. In John’s Gospel, we read that Jesus said, “the Father and I are one.” Paul holds up Jesus’ relationship with his Father when he exhorts the Philippians, in that beautiful passage, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited...” Our relationships with each other are to be self-giving, taking care of each other, not destructively competitive. Jürgen Moltmann writes, “The Trinitarian unity of the Son and the Father through the Spirit is a model for the relationships of men and women in the Spirit of Christ.” As theologian Barbara Brown Zikmund puts it, “God as community calls us to shared responsibility.” To take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously, she writes, means to adopt “a radical ethic of justice and care... a vision that the self and the other should be treated as of equal worth.”

Finally, understanding the model of our creation to be found in God’s three-in-one nature implies that we are created to be in relationship with God. There is a wonderful concept that has been used to describe the inner relationship of the Trinity that I think also sheds some light on our intended relationship with God. In writing of the loving exchange of energy between the three persons of the Trinity, the eighth-century theologian John of Damascus uses the Greek word “perichoresis,” literally “dancing around.” John uses the term to signify his concept of the internal relationship of God, that all three persons of the Trinity mutually share in the life of the others, so that none is isolated or detached from the actions of the others. But let’s take the metaphor on its own terms for a moment, as many writers have done. Ultimately, this dance of God is not, as at least one writer has suggested, a pas de deux between Father and Son with the Spirit providing the music. Nor is it a trio. In the greater plan of God, the perichoresis is a quadrille, a dance of four partners – our Source, our Brother, our Comforter and fourth, the Bride of Christ, the Church, ourselves.

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How do we live out our entry into the dance of God? To begin with, we must seek God's presence. All of us come to this place once or twice a week because we are part of a community; we want to spend time with our friends, to have conversation with them, to enjoy their company. But it is more than that as well, for God is a part, the very head of this community. When we enter into study or worship, we are to allow ourselves to become aware of the very immanent presence of God, our God who is closer to us than the person sitting nearest to us in a pew. In praising God with our songs, in coming to God in prayer with our joys and concerns, our hopes and our fears, in studying the Scriptures together, we seek the face of God, we offer ourselves up as partners in the dance. But truly fulfilling our creation in the image of God means putting God on our dance card more than once or twice a week. We must seek the face of God; open ourselves to God's presence, every day. From our forebears in the faith, those giants of the spirit who have left tracks for us to follow, we learn that prayer, meditation, study of the scriptures, are crucial disciplines in keeping our relationship with God alive. I am continually challenged to improve my own discipline in these areas, not only by the words of saints of the past in my reading but also in the testimony of saints of the present, right here in this room, and my observation of the quality of your spiritual lives. Let us lovingly exhort each other to spend time every day in cultivating our relationship with God through study and prayer.

But as we all know, those are not the only ways in which we draw nearer to our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. There are so many other ways in which we encounter God. We see God in the beauty of God's creation all around us. We see God in the smile of our elders, in the tear of a child. We see God in the glory of human achievement and in the sorrow of the poor. We enter further and further into loving relationship with God by entering further and further into loving relationship with humankind and with all creation. As we work to serve our fellow humans, to alleviate suffering, to help the helpless, to befriend the lonely, to bring Good News to the poor, our dance with the Triune God becomes closer, more intimate. As we care for the Earth and its creatures, bringing Creation to fulfillment as we fulfill our divine mandate, then we experience the oneness with the Father for which Jesus was our role model. My brothers and sisters, we were created to be in relationship with God Who Is Love, and despite all of human brokenness and failing in the millennia since, despite all of our own rebellions and selfishness, God has never given up on that relationship. Thanks to work of Christ Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we can have clean hearts and new spirits and enter fully into the amazing, sustaining relationship with our Creator that was always intended. Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.