

Imago Dei and Other Dangerous Ideas

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Ancient Witness: Genesis 1:26-27

Today, I'm going to talk about one of the most radical ideas in the entire Bible. And it is this idea that within every human being is the Imago Dei, or the image of God. Every person bears the resemblance of God. And it is radical because this means that every human being is precious beyond measure and is to be treated with awe, dignity and respect. No one is disposable. No life is less valuable than other lives. And this idea has the power to transform the world.

In our text today from the ancient creation myth in Genesis, it says, "God created humankind in God's own image." Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggeman points out that humankind is spoken in both the singular ("In the image of God he created him") and the plural ("male and female he created them"). He writes:

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 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.

So when we look at an individual, we see all humankind. We see the person as part of that single human community.

Jesus latched onto this aspect of his tradition in his actions and his teachings. As that great scholar, Joseph Campbell said,

What is the kingdom? It lies in our realization of the ubiquity of the divine presence in our neighbors, in our enemies, in all of us.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians he said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28) Now to hear that passage is, for the most part, no big deal. But given the cultural and social circumstances, it was revolutionary.

In this one sentence, Paul touched on three polarities: Slaves/free, Jew/Gentile, male/female. These are three basic ways that people can be different from each other. In addressing these differences, Paul obviously isn't saying that these differences suddenly disappear. To be human entails differences. It means that there will be social, ethnic and sexual differences that one inherits, and these differences do not vanish. But what Paul is saying is that the barriers are destroyed. The differences are still there, but the gospel makes these differences irrelevant in the ultimate sense. In midst of all this human diversity, all the differences, deep within us, is the indelible image of God, which makes us all one. All God's children are precious: young and old,

rich and poor, male and female, binary and non binary, gay and straight, all races, all skin colors, all countries of origin. Yes, there are differences, but they don't matter. What matters is our common humanity. What matters is that together, we are all in the image of God.

This is why racism or any form of supremacy is a sin against God and God's children. It literally throws away the biblical principle of Imago Dei, the image of God in all of us with no exceptions.

All through human history we can see when the Imago Dei is ignored, it has brought division, pain and suffering upon the world. White Europeans failed to see the humanity, the image of God, in African slaves, viewing them as less than human, as beasts of burden, as mere property. And White Europeans failed to see the humanity, the image of God in Native Americans, stealing their land, viewing them as savages, less than human, destroying their culture and anglicizing their children. German Nazis failed to see the humanity, the image of God, in Jewish people, viewing them as subhuman, justifying the mass murder of over six million. When we fail to see this precious image in others, it leads to inhuman, monstrous behavior, covering up and obscuring the divine image in the oppressor. When we violate the dignity and precious dignity of others, it becomes difficult to recognize us as God's children.

And to say that we have overcome these divisions today is to deceive ourselves. For these structures of oppression still exist, sometimes in more insidious and subtle forms. For we continue to fail to see the full humanity, the image of God, in Black Americans, who suffer unequal treatment in the courts and at the hands of the police. We continue to fail to see the full humanity, the image of God, in immigrants coming from south of our border, turning away men, women and children we are desperately trying to escape violence and crushing poverty. And we see how for years Israel continued to fail to see the full humanity, the image of God, in the Palestinian people, who they have held captive in the occupied territories and have used their overwhelming military force to decimate and kill men, women and children if there is any resistance. And today we are witnessing the full horror of this.

But we can see this message of the Imago Dei breaking through all religious traditions. As Eknath Easwaran wrote,

The scriptures and mystics of all religions concur on what to believe: that the core of our personality is divine, and that the purpose of life is to discover this divinity for ourselves.

But sadly, we can also see how each religion can lose its way and lose sight and succumb to the spirits of fear and selfishness. This idea that people are never to be nameless, faceless objects that we can ignore, demonize or bomb. This spiritual truth is endlessly challenging and disturbing. It threatens our comfort, our entitlement and even national security.

But our sacred texts say that it doesn't need to be this way; it shouldn't be this way. If we really believed our Bible, it would utterly transform our world. For the more we see God's imprint in others, the more the divine image shines through us. The more goodness, compassion, and justice flow through us, the more we reflect God's image.

Thomas Merton, that amazing monk, mystic and spiritual guide, wrote about an experience he had in downtown Louisville. He was sitting there in the middle of the shopping district watching all the people and he suddenly become overwhelmed with the realization of the image of God in all of them. “At the center of our being,” he wrote, “is a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God.” He said, “It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody.” Each person is unaware that they are walking around shining like the sun! He famously and beautifully described this deep insight of his experience like this:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. (Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p. 153-154)

This reminds me of that great prayer by Macrina Wiederkehr: “O God, help me to believe the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is.” When we truly realize that we are in the image of God, that we take after our divine Mother and Father, our lives become transformed. And the light that is within us shines like a pure diamond. And then we see this likeness in all people, our siblings, as we fall to our knees in recognition. God is love, and we are created in the image of this love. And so when we are compassionate and generous; when we are sacrificially loving, seeking the well-being of another ahead of our own; when we are in community, in right relationship with others, holding them in reverence; then this image shines more brightly through us.

Now, there is an aspect to Jesus’ teaching about everyone deserving love—even outcasts and enemies—that is radical and revolutionary. The idea that every person is precious, is invaluable, is a child of God and bears the divine imprint, was a strange and dangerous idea in the ancient world.

It’s important to understand that this society was highly stratified. You had all the wealth and power concentrated in the hands of very few, beginning with the emperor and the regional client-kings who served the empire. Almost all of the others were either peasants, living at a subsistence level, or worse. In the words of Thomas Hobbs, it was a life that was “poor, nasty, brutish and short.” This way of life depended on the idea that the lives of the masses were expendable and didn’t matter very much. The poor were seen as worthless, put on this earth to live as beasts of burden, to struggle to survive and to serve the wealthy. And this view was internalized by the masses. They accepted their lot of servitude and desperation. They adopted the belief that they were worthless and deserved to be exploited and abused.

So here comes Jesus, saying that all people are created in God’s image! All people—men, women; rich, poor; Jew, Greek; all nationalities—are precious in God’s sight. Well, not only was this a very challenging idea for people to live out, but if the poor masses would every begin to see themselves that way, there would be big, big problems.

The idea was revolutionary and threatened the established order that was built on the idea that all these people are only good for their utility for those in power. If all these people realize that they were each created in God's image, deserving dignity, fair treatment, food, shelter, healthcare, leisure time, a good life—if they started to realize and demand these things, the established order would be turned upside down!

And you can begin to see how spiritual teachers like Jesus would be seen by the empire and the small elite as a nuisance and a threat. He would have to be eliminated, or this crazy talk about the Imago Dei—of everyone deserving love, respect and dignity—could lead to rebellion.

And as we continue our Lenten journey toward the betrayal, torture and execution of Jesus on Good Friday, we can see part of the reason why Jesus had to go and why he was killed.