

God's Image and Likeness

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[0 : 00] Good morning to all of you. My name is Tommy. I'm a pastor here at Church of the Advent.

I'm hoping that you had a wonderful Thanksgiving, and I'm really glad for those of you who are visiting from out of town. Maybe you came in town to celebrate Thanksgiving with family, and I'm glad that you're here this morning. We're in a series that we started a couple of weeks ago. We wanted to get a head start on Advent. We love Church of the Advent, the season of Advent. Our name reflects that, but also it's a series that I think is worth a lot of time, and so we wanted more than four weeks to get into it, but it's really our Advent series.

And this is a series that is called This Is My Body, and it's a series about embodiment. But we're asking the question, what do our bodies mean, and what do our bodies have to teach us about what it means to be human beings, our identity, our purpose in the world? Are our bodies central to our humanness, or are they peripheral, secondary, and how should we think about all that? So that's the series. Some of you have asked over the last couple of weeks why we chose this particular topic.

I would say this by way of an answer. I think that it's not an exaggeration to say that this may be one of the most important questions of our age. The question of human identity and purpose, and in particular the role that our bodies play in our identity as human beings. There seems to be an enormous amount of disagreement over how to answer these questions, which is noteworthy considering that our answer to this question shapes just about everything else in our lives and in our society.

How do we think about ourselves and our identity? How should we treat other people, particularly people who are different from us or who believe differently than we do? Whom do we consider to be people in the first place? How do we approach things like human rights or education or poverty or politics, right? It all starts here with human identity and purpose and the role our bodies play in that. And so this morning we're going to take a stab at beginning to try to answer these questions by looking at Scripture. And I think that the theme this morning is every bit as important as the question itself. We're looking at Genesis chapter 1, in particular verse 26, then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness. The topic this morning is the fact that human beings are made in God's image likeness. Whether or not you consider yourselves to be Christians, and I think there are some people here who are not sure what you believe, and again, we are delighted that you're here. I think that you're in the right place, and hopefully some of your questions or concerns will be addressed this morning. But whether or not you consider yourself to be a Christian, chances are you have been profoundly shaped by this idea, that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Frankly, that's because life in Western civilization would be inexplicable apart from this idea. It is a pillar of how we think and live in

[3 : 38] Western civilization. But as important and central as it is to our way of life, what does it mean? A lot of people don't know what it means. There's a lot of confusion. And then why does it matter? So these are our two questions this morning. We are created in God's image and likeness. What does that mean? And then why does it matter? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for gathering us together this morning. We're here at your invitation. And you're not a silent God, as Scripture says. You're not deaf, dumb, mute. You're not made of wood or stone or metal. You're a living God who speaks to your people, who dwells in the midst of your people. We pray that you would speak to us this morning, Lord, that we might be transformed by the same word that created the heavens and the earth.

Recreate and renew us, Lord, for your glory. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, let me give you a little context to Genesis chapter 1, very well-known chapter in the Bible. It's the first chapter in the Bible. Genesis chapter 1, verse 1 through chapter 2, verse 4 gives us a

theological account of the creation event. So it's not a science text. It was not written to explain how the world came to be. It was written to answer the far deeper question of why the world came to be, why we came to be. And it has this structured symmetrical order to it. And it looks a lot like a liturgy. For those of us who worship with liturgy, you look at the original text and it looks a whole lot like a liturgy. Which is why many scholars believe that this was actually originally written to be used in public gathered worship. And in this liturgy of creation, the creation event is divided up into days. And over the course of these days, God creates time and space and land and sea. And then he creates all of the inhabitants that fill these various domains. And then on the sixth day, something interesting happens. After God creates all of the other land animals, the liturgy changes. The rhythm changes, which is a way of signaling, this is really important, pay attention. And then God says, let us make man, or that can be translated as humanity, in our image and likeness. Now he's already created all of the other living creatures. He's already pronounced them all good because they're all exactly what he intended for them to be. And yet up to this point, nothing, no one anywhere has been created to bear God's image and likeness. So right away, we're being told that human beings are utterly unique in this way. But what does that mean? Right? As you think about yourself, as we think about ourselves, what about us uniquely reflects God's image and likeness? What is it about you that bears God's image in the world? Historically, people have had different ways of interpreting this.

There's a great summary of those various approaches to this from a scholar named Mark Cortez. We actually had the privilege of having him speak at our recent synod and convocation gathering that we did as a diocese. And we recorded all of those talks. And as soon as we get them, we're going to put them on our website so that you can access them if you want to go deeper into this topic. But just to give you a summary of the various positions on the meaning of the image of God in us, one very popular idea is what we might think of as the structural understanding of this. A lot of people think that there is some innate capacity unique to human beings that reflects God's image. So very often, you may have heard this, people will say, well, it's our capacity for rational thought. We're the only creatures in the world that have this capacity for self-aware rational thought. That's how we reflect God's image. So I mean, that's one of the ideas that I heard growing up as well. What I would say is this, while it is true that we have a capacity for rational thought, a number of scientists actually now claim that dolphins and whales also seem to have this capacity. And because of this, there's a growing argument that they should be considered non-human persons and afforded all of the rights of personhood. And it turns out that many of the capacities that we think make us unique as human beings are actually shared with other animals. When it comes to capacity, we're not quite as unique as we like to think we are. Moreover, this raises a question of how do we think about human beings who might lack this capacity for one reason or another? Severe cognitive disabilities or brain damage or coma or other things that might be idle. Now, I know that might be a weird curveball because almost always when you read the word idol in the Bible, it's a bad thing. But I want you to hang with me and I want to try to understand why this word would be used in this way. In the ancient Near East, in order to worship your God or your gods, you needed a temple because God doesn't just hang out in the countryside. You need a place to go to meet with your God. So you would have to build a temple. And then once you build your temple and get everything done, the last thing that you would do is you would need an idol to put in that temple that would be the divine manifestation of your God for you to worship. So you would create that idol out of stone or wood or metal or whatever other material you might want to use.

[9 : 22] And then you would ritually imbue that idol with the presence of your deity. And from that point forward, whatever you do to the idol, you do to the God. That idol is not just a symbol of your God. It doesn't just represent your God. It is the presence of your God in that temple. So it becomes a very sacred thing. Whatever you do to the Selem, you do to the God.

Very important. Keeping that in mind when we go back through the Genesis account, this liturgy of creation, what we begin to see and what a number of scholars have convincingly argued is that when God is creating the heavens and the earth, what God is actually doing is creating a temple. And that all of creation, right, the sky, the sea, the land, the heavens, the earth, that God is creating one great temple.

And he gets to the point where the temple has been created. And the last step is to create the idol to put in the center of the temple. Where's the Selem? Well, it's you and me, right? The idol in the temple of creation that is meant to be God's divine presence in the world. It's the human being,

right? It's the human being. So it's not merely your capacity for rational thought or your ability to do something such as exercise domain or even your relationships that make you an image bearer. It is your body itself. Your body is the image. Your body is the idol. It is your body as God's divine presence in the world, not merely symbolic.

God's actual presence. Whatever you do to the idol, you do to the God, right? So idols are by definition embodied. The entire point of an idol is to make the invisible divine God physically present in the world. It's to make the divine physical. And if you ever wonder, are we overemphasizing the physical here? Well, just look where the text goes. God determines to create God, man in his image.

And then it says, so God created man in his own image, comma, in the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. The emphasis there is on the physicality of our bodies.

[12:15] God's tselem, God's idols, are male and female human bodies in the world. Now just let that sink in. God created sexed, gendered bodies to be physical manifestation of his divine presence in the world.

Does our capacity for self-aware rational thought reflect God? Yes. Does our ability to exercise domain in the world fulfill God's purpose for us and reflect his image in the world? Yes.

Is our capacity as sexed, gendered human beings for love and relationship and procreation a reflection of God's image? Yes. But ultimately, what does it mean to bear God's image? It means to have your body in the world being what God intended it to be, his divine manifestation in the physical world.

Just meditate on that. I could stop right there and we could just sit and think about that. And that would be sufficient. But you know me too well, and I'm not going to stop. And we're going to keep going. And you can think about that later. What does it matter that this is the case?

And why is it so important? I would say this. And at the risk of sounding hyperbolic, I don't think I'm being, I don't think I'm exaggerating here. This may be the single most important idea in the history of human society. I'm hard pressed to find another more important idea. Because in the ancient Near East, the idea that a human being could be the presence of God in the world was very unoriginal.

[13:51] Lots of societies believed that a human being could be God's presence in the world, but that only ever applied to kings or emperors. The radical nature of this claim, the radical nature of the Genesis creation liturgy, is that this applies to every single human being on the planet.

Not just the kings, but the peasants. Right? The people that you would look at and think, they're the trash of society. They're on the margins. Nobody cares about people like that.

They're cannon fodder. Genesis would say, no, they're image bearers. They bear God's presence in the world. Right? Every human being, male and female, is a living, breathing manifestation of God's divine presence. This idea is foundational in at least two ways. The way we see ourselves, and the way we see and treat one another. It's foundational. So let me just go into a little more detail. It's foundational for how we see ourselves. You know, in our culture, you will often hear the message, love yourself. Hear it all the time. Tons of memoirs written where that is the essential core theme. Here's how I learned to love myself. It's a great message. I hope everybody loves themselves. But it does raise a question in our society. Why should we?

You know, I mean, I know the truth about myself. And I can just tell you right now, there are a lot of things that I do that make me hard to love. And at the end of the day, when I stack all of that up, should I love myself? Should I love myself? If I'm really honest about myself? You know, in a secularized society, there's actually no answer to that question of why we should love ourselves. If we are just here as the product of a kind of blind evolutionary process unfolding with no ultimate meaning behind it, if we're just a step in a biological process unfolding over millennia, we're just kind of one stop on that train track into infinity. Why should we love ourselves? Why do we matter at all? And here's what happens. If you have no foundation for your own self-worth, if it's not grounded in anything, then it ultimately becomes connected to what we do.

Right? Ultimately, then, our self-worth becomes rooted in what we do. We have to sort of prove our worth. We have to create our own foundation for why we should love ourselves. And another way to put it is self-worth then becomes performative. Right? It's the only other option you have. And so what we find now in society is that we live in a kind of culture where we have to continually project a version of ourselves, an identity out into the world, and gain affirmation to remind us and affirm to us that we are worthy. And so our self-worth, our self-image becomes performative. And this was

happening, this has been happening forever, as long as human beings have been around.

[17 : 02] You know, Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes about this, how our self-love, our amour propre, as he calls it, becomes inflamed when we, when humans gather in cities and we're around other people and we begin to make comparisons between ourselves and other people. And he said, all of the injustice in the world arises because of our desire to prove our worth over and above other people. His answer was to go out and live by yourself in the woods. Now think about where we are today with the rise of the internet and social media and how much more inflamed all of this becomes. Constant performative self-worth seeking affirmation into this bottomless pit. It's an endless cycle. But if you believe that you are made in the image of God, then you have an entirely different foundation for your self-image.

And it's one that is not rooted in you or anything that you do. It is simply rooted in your physical existence in the world and God's purpose for you when he made you. So we, as people who believe this, love and value ourselves tremendously. But we love ourselves not because of anything we do, but because of who we are as God's image bearers. So we love ourselves, but not for our own sake. We love ourselves for God's sake. And that's a completely different way to think about your own self-worth.

And so let me just say to kids in the room, and let me just say to parents of kids in the room, it is never too early to start helping our children build a sense of their own self-image and self-worth on the foundation of their identity as image bearers. There is never, ever, ever too early to begin building that foundation, helping our kids understand that the thing that gives them worth, the thing that gives them value, I think the only way to build a healthy self-image is to root it in your identity as an image bearer. Right? And I think that when we do this with our kids, that is one of the best ways to sort of inoculate them and to prepare them for all of the toxicity and all of the lies out there about what makes you worthy and what makes you valuable.

This is going to counter all of those false narratives about identity. You are here and you are infinitely valuable because you bear the image of the God who made you. And that's your purpose. And it doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't matter how many times you mess up. It doesn't matter how you might embarrass yourself. It doesn't matter if your life doesn't turn out the way you thought it was before you said anything, before you did anything, before you even took your first breath. You had infinite worth because you were made to bear the image of God. Right? So it's foundational for how we see ourselves. It's also foundational for how we see other people.

You know, you could go outside right now over the Tacoma Park farmer's market and you could just grab some random people and you could just say, hey, I'm just doing a survey. Religious, irreligious, doesn't matter. Hey, let me just ask, do you guys believe in universal human rights? And you'd probably get 100% yes across the board. Now, a lot of people think that the reason that our society has gotten to the place where we believe in universal human rights almost across the board is because of the enlightenment. They say, well, it's the enlightenment that really gave us this understanding. But what we need to understand is that's a myth. That's a kind of modern myth.

[20 : 49] The enlightenment didn't produce these values. The enlightenment poached these values off the Judeo-Christian tree and rebranded them, repackaged them. The enlightenment, as it distanced itself, as people began to distance themselves from the idea of a creator God, and as more and more hope was put in pure science, not just science, which we believe is good and godly and a worthy pursuit, God-glorifying pursuit, but what we might think of as scientism, science as the ultimate answer to all questions. The more that began to happen, you began to have a refashioning of how we think about human beings. And so the enlightenment produced a racial taxonomy that is the foundation for modern racism. The enlightenment produced utopian visions of genetic purification through eugenics, right?

Because no longer does every single human being have an eight value and worth as an image bearer. What we need to understand is the entire foundation for universal human rights, justice, and equality is rooted in the Imago Dei. That's the foundation for it. Because remember, anything that you do to the idol, anything that you do to the image, you do to God himself.

That's the entire foundation for ethics. So our desire, not just we at Church of the Advent, but the Christian desire to protect the rights of the unborn, the Christian desire to fight against racial injustice and inequality, the Christian desire to fight for equal rights and opportunities for men and women in society, the Christian desire to set the oppressed free or to stand with and give voice to the disenfranchised, the Christian desire to uphold the dignity of the elderly, these all come from the

same place. It really cuts across political lines because all of these values, all of these commitments are rooted in our belief that every human being is made in the image of God. And cognitive capacity, wealth, skin color, class, gender, none of it matters.

Because they're made in the image of God. And you know, this includes the way we see our enemies. It includes the way we see our enemies. When you see someone as your enemy, it is very easy to begin to see them as less than human.

As less than human. You know, I was home, my family lives in North Carolina. I was home this past week. And I went with my dad and boys, we went somewhere and I went to use the bathroom and I looked down at the toilet and I noticed that it was glowing. And I kind of bent over and looked more closely and I realized that that was actually the face of a certain political leader being projected into the toilet bowl. So that when you use the bathroom, you are urinating or defecating on the image of this certain political leader that will remain nameless. And, but it was rural North Carolina.

[24 : 13] You know, so, um, I laughed. I took a picture of it. My son went in there, he used the bathroom.

He came out and he said, why is the toilet glowing? I said, take a look. And he, and he had the same reaction I did. And I laughed. And then, and then, you know, my very next thought was, well, this is exactly what we do, right? We take the image of God and we project the image of God onto a toilet.

And then we use the bathroom on it because it's our political enemy. And, uh, and, and I realized that this is just a one small example of something that we do all the time. We, we take somebody with whom we disagree or we see as other or enemy and we dehumanize them. And when we do that, we are defacing the image of God, we're committing heresy. Whatever you do to the image, you do to the God. So if you urinate into that toilet in a way, you're doing that to God. And, uh, and I was very convicted and very challenged as I thought about, while that was an obvious example that was easy to spot all of the ways I probably do that in my mind, all the ways I probably cease thinking of people as individuals who are worth my curiosity and I group them, which is a dehumanizing thing to do.

I don't need to talk to you. I don't need to know what you think about this or that. I don't need to be curious about you as an individual because I know your type. You're urinating into the toilet when you say that. I know your type. I know what you think. You don't even need to open your mouth. I've already written you off. That's dehumanizing. What Genesis tells us, what this image bearer fact tells us is that we simply cannot do that.

[26 : 12] Whereas Christians who believe this, that is not afforded to us as an option. Each individual is an irreducibly complex, unimaginably valuable bearer of God's image, which means they deserve in the least dignity, respect, and curiosity. I want to know who you are. So what this means is we have to resist the urge to dehumanize. We have to treat each person as an irreducibly complex individual.

Sometimes it's really hard. You know, sometimes it's hard to see that in other people. Sometimes it's really hard to see the image of God in ourselves. Sometimes we look in the mirror and we think, how in the world could I bear God's image? Or how in the world could that person who hurt me or traumatized me, how could they also be an image bearer? I just don't see it.

And you know, sometimes it is very, very hard to remember that we are the image of God. It's easy to forget that because even though that is true, we are far from perfect. So for the Bible to say that you bear God's image is not to say that you are perfect.

And because of human sin, because of human rebellion, the world is broken. We're broken. Our bodies are broken. Our hearts are broken. Our thinking, as scripture says, is futile.

It's shrouded in darkness. In other words, we can't think our way out of these problems. So the image is there in each of us, but the image has been blurred. And it needs to be restored in each one of us. Right? That blurred image needs to be restored. You know, that reminds me, back in 2012, you may have seen this story that went viral. And this is back when not as many stories went viral. So I think a lot of people heard about this one, about an 81-year-old woman who was trying to restore a fading fresco in a Spanish church. It was this beautiful work of art, and it had faded over time.

[28 : 14] And she was an amateur painter and had all the best of intentions, but took it upon herself without telling anyone to sort of restore this fresco on her own. And the reason it went viral is because over time, she sort of transformed this person's face into what many people refer to as a

furry Ewok.

And so this very sweet woman sort of made a big mess of this restoration project. And it wasn't really her fault. She meant well, but art restoration requires, in the least, a professional painter. Ideally, the artist who painted it has the opportunity to restore it. If you could have the original artist come in and do that restoration, it might even be better than it was before. And it's the exact same when it comes to us and the image of God in us. You know, when we try to restore ourselves, when we try to do this renovation purely in our own willpower, purely in our own learning, it's laughable. Right? The result is a caricature. The result is a cartoon. Only God can fully restore the faded image that is in you back to its original glory because he's the original artist.

And what the Bible says is that when God restores his image in you, actually the outcome is going to be better than it was when he first made you. It's going to be even more glorious. Right? And this is why Jesus Christ has come. This is one of the reasons that this is an Advent series when we focus on the fact that Jesus came and the fact that he is going to come again. Colossians 1.15 says, Jesus is the image of the invisible God. The image of the invisible God. The firstborn of all creation.

What does that mean? If you want to see an unblurred image of God in the world, look to Jesus Christ. Jesus shows us what human beings should be.

[30 : 29] If you want to see an unblurred image of the invisible God. If you want to know what a fully formed, image-bearing human being looks like, look to him. That's the true image of God. And a couple of chapters later in that same letter in Colossians, here's how Paul describes the Christian life. He says, starting in verse 9, put off the old self with its practices and put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Jesus didn't just come to save people. He came to restore the image of God in people. He came to restore you and I. And when you come to him in faith and when you were baptized into his name, the Holy Spirit begins a massive renovation project in you to, as it says in Romans, conform you to the image of Christ, to conform you to the image of God.

So this is going to be our theme throughout the season of Advent as we focus on the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. It's going to be our theme as we think about what it means to be human and what the coming of Christ means for our humanity.

He doesn't just show us what we should be. He shows us what we will be. What we will be. And as we follow him, we learn not only what it means to bear God's image, but we become more and more truly and fully human.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. Lord, as Dan asked us to do earlier, just to think as we pray for you to come, what we hope to see restored and renewed.

Lord, and I pray that whatever else that might be, that we would think of ourselves and our own hearts, that we would think of those around us, Lord, all of the ways society dehumanizes, disenfranchises, robs people of dignity.

[32 : 54] Lord, and that we would think about our enemies, Lord, those people who we may ourselves dehumanize in our own minds. And I pray that you would give us eyes and hearts to see your image clearly in each one of us.

And that we would come to love ourselves, not for our own sake, but for your sake, even as we turn our eyes to Jesus Christ and hope for renewal in him. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.