

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, July 10, 2022
10am

Text: Genesis 2:4b-25 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Today we launch our summer worship series, “Faces of Our Faith.” For the next nine weeks we will hear biblical stories of faith. Some may be familiar to you, like today’s story; others you may hear for the very first time. As we study these stories, I encourage you to take time to reflect on your own faith story, as well as the stories of those people in your life who have modeled faith for you in unexpected ways. We have a study journal to accompany the series with artwork, short devotions, and prayer and journaling prompts. If you have not already picked up a copy, you can get one from the ushers, and if you would like a digital copy, you can email the church office and request one be sent to you.

I will be sharing pieces of my faith story as we go, as a way of introduction. The Bible is a living document, animated by the Holy Spirit, and one of the ways we interpret Scripture as Methodists is through the lens of our personal experiences. Always the Spirit is encouraging us to wonder: Where does this ancient story intersect with my story? How are they similar? How are they different? And why should I care about these stories at all?

The Bible is the story of the people of God in a particular time and place. But because we believe that God is alive and active in the world, the story of God’s people continues well beyond the words recorded in our Holy Scriptures. That story also includes what is happening right here, right now – in each of our lives and in our life together as Community UMC.

Today we begin our series with a story about the very beginning of things. Genesis is our faith tradition's origin story. And while Christians hold different beliefs on how human beings came to exist, the point of the story is not *how* we were created, but *why* and for *what purpose*.

Genesis has two creation accounts: chapter 1 and chapter 2. These two stories were likely written by different authors with different goals. Genesis 1 reads like a news report: God speaks aloud, and creation comes into existence. God is at the center of the story, and the emphasis is on what God is doing. In Genesis 1, human beings are created last. We are the crown of creation, the *imago dei* – made in the image – the likeness – of God.

But in Genesis 2, the order is reversed. Human beings are now one of God's *first* creations. There is a lot of emphasis on dirt in this story. God forms Adam from the dust of the ground and literally breathes life into him (v. 7). Adam ('*adam*') is the name of the first male human being, but '*adam*' is also the Hebrew word for humanity – all human beings, regardless of gender – so in this story Adam represents all humankind, not just men. His name comes from the word '*adamah*', which means 'ground'. So '*adam*' literally means something like 'of the earth' or 'earthling.'

After God creates this first earthling, God gives him a vocation. God sets him down in a garden and instructs him to "till it and keep it" (v. 15). The Hebrew word is *abad* and it means "to serve." Adam is instructed to be a servant of the land. Before there are other human beings, before there are even animals, God gives human beings a patch of dirt and then instructs us to serve it – to put the needs of the land before ourselves.

That's a very different relationship to the earth than we have today. Today we mostly relate to the earth as a resource we can exploit to meet our needs (and our greed). But in God's vision of Creation, the earth is a creature that God has lovingly made and entrusted to the care of human beings. God anoints Adam a co-creator with God. Human beings are called to cultivate and tend the earth – called to cultivate a common life (communion) with God's creation. Genesis teaches us that we need the earth, and the earth needs us.

But God recognizes that the earthling is different from God's other creatures. The earthling is alone, and it is not good to be alone. God knows this because *God* is not alone. In Genesis 1 we hear God say, "Let *us* make humans in *our* image, according to *our* likeness" (1:26). This "divine council" is God talking to Godself. As Christians, we receive this wisdom as proof of the Trinity, that in the beginning God is Three in One and One in Three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's very being proves the value of sharing community (communion) with others.

And so, because it is not good for the earthling to be alone, God brings to him all kinds of creatures: dogs and cats and cows and chickens and lions and tigers and bears – oh my! One by one, in a great parade, God presents them before Adam in the hopes that Adam will find a companion. God also invites Adam to name each creature as he sees fit. This is such a tender and inspiring image of our God! God loves this earthling so much that God gives up some of His control over Creation and lets Adam be part of the creative process by naming each of the animals. What a gift that from the very beginning God has given us creative agency in the world! We have the power to make and unmake and remake the world around us through our choices and decisions.

On that day the earthling invents a lot of creative names for the animals, but still he does not find the right companion. Now, that is not a biblical statement on the value of other creatures. I have a little white cat named Holly and I love her with all my heart. I'm always using lint rollers to get her fur off my clothing. It is a privilege to care for her, and she returns my attention with lots of purrs and cuddles and silly cat antics that make me laugh. But there is always this difference between us that cannot be overcome, because she is a cat and I am a human being. She cannot understand me the way another human being can.

God recognizes that. Adam needs a companion that shares the same earthling traits as him. Our Scripture lesson says that Adam needs a helper and a partner. Those words have complicated connotations, but God's vision for Adam's companion is a vision of equality. A different and perhaps better translation is 'sustainer.' Adam needs another human being to sustain and nurture him when he is lonely.

And so, God creates Eve. And instead of being made from the dirt, she is built from one of Adam's ribs. These first two earthlings – these first two humans – literally share a piece of each other. They belong to each other.

Again, we must be careful about the conclusions we draw from this story. Genesis 2 is not a complete commentary on the origin of humankind. Nor is it a complete commentary on gender roles or marriage. The Bible has lots more to say about those things than just this chapter, as does our reason and tradition and experience as followers of Jesus Christ. What makes Eve 'good' in Adam's eyes is not her primarily her femaleness, but her *humanity*. In her, Adam sees a reflection of his *own* humanity, his 'earthlingness.' But more importantly he also sees something of the image of God that is inside him. In each of us resides a spark of the divine, and my spark greets your spark. In great joy and wonder, Adam says to the second earthling:

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh." (v. 23)

The first words that a human being speaks are deep words of recognition, one human being to another. *I see you. You are mine and I am yours. We belong to each other, because we both belong to God.*

There is a silent epidemic of loneliness scouring our society. We are an incredibly lonely country and culture. And our deep polarization – politically, ideologically, spiritually – is only compounding our loneliness. I believe that the church’s mission in this age of isolation is to cultivate communities of deep belonging – belonging that cuts across race and class and creed, belonging that is grounded in the practice of acknowledging the image of God in each other and in every person that walks through our church doors.

One of my earliest memories of loneliness, as well as my earliest memory of belonging, is from my first summer as a camper at Twinlow Camp, just up the road from here. I was eleven years old, and I had never been to church camp before. I was very shy and I had not made any friends. I was also terribly homesick. I remember sitting in the dry and dusty grass above the playfield one afternoon, alone and wishing the week would hurry up and end, when one of the camp counselors approached me. She sat down in the dirt next to me. I do not remember her name, but I do remember the feeling of her presence at my side – like a small, warm glow in the center of my chest. It was a relief to finally be seen and acknowledged by someone after spending several days alone in a crowd.

She spent an hour talking to me, gently coaxing me out of my shell. She was ten years my senior and there were probably more fun ways she could have spent that afternoon than making conversation with an awkward pre-teen. But twenty years later that simple act of kindness, of one human being recognizing the need of another, remains with me. Though I have forgotten her name, hers is one of the faces of faith that has formed me as a follower of Jesus. She taught me that the church is a place where our need and vulnerability as human beings can be seen, acknowledged, and affirmed. She also helped me feel like I could belong at camp. I came back every summer until I graduated – that was the power of her simple witness in my life.

The church does not always uphold its Biblical mandate to cultivate communities of belonging. We exclude more often than we include, by choice and by unconscious bias. Part of our task as Christians is to confront the barriers in our common life that keep us from cultivating beloved community for every person. I know that you all have been doing this work long before I arrived, and I am honored to come alongside you in your mission to be a church where all are truly welcome.

Our Scripture lesson reminds us that we are created to serve the image of God in each other. In a moment you will formally install me as your new pastor. The items on the altar are the items of my ministry – they represent how I am called to serve the image of God in each of you through servant leadership. Every time a new person joins the community of faith, the community is remade as it receives the gifts and graces of its new member. The community says to the new person: “You belong here. We need each other.” My prayer is that as we join in ministry together, we will commit ourselves again to serving the image of God in each other and in every person who walks through our doors.

And now I will invite the Chair of our Board, Cindy Meyer, to join me at the altar and lead us in our liturgy of installation.