

The Image of God

We are going to be taking a Sunday off of Luke today to open up to a different section of the word to address some of the developments in our world in the past weeks, so if you could turn to Genesis 1.

These are days of anger and frustration and polarization, with people not seeing eye-to-eye.

They are days of pain and mourning, days of fear and destruction, days of sickness and poverty and despair and hopelessness.

It's almost like the air around us is on fire - the world is hyper-political and hyper-partisan. Politicians love to divide for blocks of votes and throw kerosene on that fire. And Christians, as members of society, are susceptible to that influence.

And so many of our opportunities for human interaction have been closed - we can't sit across a restaurant table or see each other in church, and our distance from one another breeds suspicion and depression. So we're taking to social media to blast one another and form teams and divisions.

So I know that any attempt to say anything into this environment is more likely to go badly than go well. I fully expect, as prepared as my sermon is, to mis-speak and upset and alienate, despite every effort to make peace with words today. Sermons like this are always responded to with many people saying I had no right to preach it, especially as a white suburb-dweller, that I went too far, that I didn't go far enough, and that my own deficiencies and church's deficiencies in some of these matters are glaring. And I also know if I didn't address these issues, we would be callous and tone-deaf.

I'm preaching this sermon on Friday morning, so there is likely to be a lot that unfolds between now and when you see it or hear it on Sunday, behind me buildings are being boarded up in preparation for tonight. So we are in the thick of it and must speak to it.

So with no effort to be politically correct, with no effort to please and tickle ears, but with every effort to point us all again to Christ, we will try to go back to the place we are too quick to wander from, the word of God as the ground of truth that we can stand on amidst the quicksand.

Our only hope for our church not to become divided in a world that is divided and on fire is not my words, but the words of God, not my work, but the work of the Holy Spirit. We need God to apply His word to our hearts to make our hearts resonate with what is true, to bring about repentance, to change our minds, to change our hearts, and to unify. He has promised that His word won't return void, so with a reliance on that promise and zero confidence in myself here I'll try to honestly bring the truth of God, the law of God, and the Gospel of God to bear on as many of the current struggles in our society as I can. So we certainly need to pray...

Today I want to go back to the beginning, where God made us and gave us our purpose. I want to go there so we can be reminded of who we are, what we are called to do, how we are to think of each other. I'd like to talk about some of the ways we've tarnished this, and the way of restoration to God and one another.

So we are in the Garden of Eden, God is creating:

Genesis 1:26-29 "26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 And 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 heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." 29 And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.

There's a lot going on in this passage, but look what God makes people to be and what God makes people to do.

The Image of God

God makes people in His image. They are to be image-bearers of God, reflectors of God. Which doesn't mean that we physically look like God, it means that we possess some of the character and attributes of God. For example, we are conscious beings, we are relational beings.

And it's important to see that the image of God in people is not dependent on their behavior. He doesn't say God promises them they will possess His image if they are fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth. He says, "You are in my image, therefore, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."

This is important because what I'm trying to establish here is that the image of God in people is universal and is not dependent on what they do. People do not possess the image of God *if*, they possess the image of God *period*. The image of God is universal, every person, from the moment of conception possesses it.

Now he very closely connects His image with the idea of dominion, He does say, "You're made in my image, so go subdue the earth", which we will get to. But if we fail to subdue the earth, if we fail to obey, it doesn't follow that we no longer possess the image of God. We are in His image as people regardless of what we do.

And later on, in Genesis 9:6, God repeats the fact that He made all people in His image, and he connects the prohibition of murder to that. Don't murder, He says, because people are made in my image.

To murder is to wage war on the image of God. And it says something about what we think about God. If a man tears up a picture of His wife, He tears up her image, we know what He thinks about His wife. And when we murder, we know what we think about God.

So this summer we saw the video of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, he was chased down and shot for no reason and his killer called out racial slurs while he shot him. We heard the story of the killing of Breonna Taylor in her home.

Last week as we witnessed the killing of George Floyd, while he begged for his life, while bystanders were crying out for his life as well. And the police officer kneeling on his neck almost seemed to taunt them as his life was snuffed out.

And because incidents like these keep piling up, the result is justified rage. That's a man made in God's image. And before we start arguing about what's going on, we all have to pause and lament that this happens far too often, that these are no isolated incidents, and that things should be very different than they are.

You can see how politicized we are if we see a video like that and immediately start explaining it away - this is an awful thing, this just keeps happening, and this should not be.

Now some would push back and say, "Well, he was on drugs." Maybe so - but the image of God in a person isn't conditional on good behavior. The image of God is innate. This is why his killing was an outrage. This is why Christians are outraged by the murder of the unborn - not because they've done anything good or evil yet, but because they innately possess the image of God.

And whatever was going on in that officer's heart, he treated Him as less than that, and we are right to want justice. We're right to lament that that happens, and that that happens so often, particularly to young black men.

And it's a real problem, because if you combine something wrong with the system with a police officer who in his heart is racist and does not believe that someone is made in God's image because of the color of his skin, the result will be tragic.

We always have a god. And if God is God, we will see all people as made in God's image. If we dethrone Him in our minds, someone rises to take His place - and the most natural someone to take God's place is the self.

So then we care more about my image - and we will respect the lives of people that we perceive to be like us, because of the color of their skin, their socioeconomic status, their background, or the fact that they are born.

And those we don't perceive to resemble our image can then have lives that we treat as expendable, and if we have a job where lives are in our hands, and there are holes in the system so that we feel like we can be protected if we do evil, we can produce the deadly and tragic results that we have been seeing.

Protests

So that outrage and desire for justice gave rise to the peaceful protests, which are good. You see peaceful protests carried out by Christians in the Bible, demands for justice in the book of Acts, and in a real sense every gathered church service is a protest - it is gathering together to with one voice confess our allegiance to a higher king, Jesus, and to protest secularism and idolatry and and life without Jesus in general.

They are drawing attention to the issue, there's real momentum, there's real hope that the gathered masses can say this needs to change, and while protests can't change the heart, they can change the laws so that perhaps wicked racist hearts can be prevented

from doing as much damage as they could. So there's a need to call for leaders in government to move quickly to address systemic failures that allow abuses of power against people made in God's image and to implement changes to ensure justice for all people.

Riots

Then, though, came the riots. Riots are not the same as peaceful protests. The destruction of property and stores and livelihoods, and more physical attacks on people made in God's image. We saw horrific video from right around the corner as the owners of a store were beaten with 2x4s, also by people not acknowledging the image of God in them. Because God isn't supreme, I am, and those who are unlike me, because I perceive them to possess some wealth or power, can be disregarded.

We saw police officers murdered, not because they were doing anything wrong, but because they were deemed to be guilty by group association, and with God off the throne, only my group matters. With no image of God in people to be concerned about, I can treat their lives as expendable.

Police

I also want to say a word to police officers and their families. I can't image what this must be like for you. I know that most of you watched the George Floyd video and you shared the outrage at what you saw, you hated that abuse of power and murder. In fact, I suspect that most of you in some ways hated it more than others did.

For me as a pastor, I certainly can't compare my life to yours. In 20 years of ministry there have only been a handful of times that my wife was at home concerned for my safety and wondering if I'd return ok. For you and your families to carry that load all the time is heroic. Romans 13 calls you God's minister and your role is so vital.

But maybe one way in which I can relate is that I, like you, am part of an industry, if you will, where many people who do what I do have abused their power and position in horrible ways. (We don't have to follow the news for more than a month to find another story of another pastor who abused somebody.) And everybody reads those articles and feels rage at those guys and their sin and hypocrisy and the destruction they cause. When I read those articles, I feel that normal rage, and then on top of that, another level of rage - because they are also making it so much harder to do what I do.

So many of us went into this work to do good, but the bad actors make it so that for me to do any good, I have to overcome a stigma that assumes the worst about me. So I would imagine that most of you in law enforcement, going out to handle riots, are every bit as outraged at this unjust killing as anyone else, and all the more because those perpetrators were wearing the same badge you wear.

And it is noble and it is right when you work to defend lives, when you work to treat everyone fairly, and when you work to defend property. These are hard days for you, and for those who carry out your work with honor, we all benefit.

Looters

Which brings up a word to those who would loot and destroy. I'm not speaking here to peaceful protestors, but to those who think the destruction of businesses is somehow a good.

Again in **Genesis 1:27-28** **"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 And 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 heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."**

After making man and woman in his image, God gives them His first command - go out, multiply (build families), subdue the earth and have dominion over it.

This is a God-given command to work and build livelihoods and homes. One of the first things we are called to do with the image of God is exercise good leadership over workplaces and households.

The impetus to work and to cultivate is absolutely innate to who we are.

So looting, stealing and destroying are messing with the sacred. They aren't Christian behaviors. King said the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek, and we know that last week a country that was almost all united in a stand against the injustice of George Floyd's murder got distracted by having to also stand against looting and rioting.

And there was damage done to livelihoods, right here next to the temple building a store was looted that is minority owned from top to bottom, that was a thriving business on a struggling corner, that was being cultivated well, and now workers are furloughed and

the store is boarded up. (We have reached out and offered our help rebuilding, by the way, and they're responded with thanks but don't have specific needs yet.)

But people's work is sacred and not to be destroyed. This was one of the great frustrations of this lockdown as people who provided for their family were called non-essential and had their livelihoods destroyed, their ability to cultivate taken away - necessary or not, it cuts a person to the core. So again, if you are hurting financially as a result of all of this, go to the care portal at graceroadchurch.org, we want to help. And if there are creative ways we can help you rebuild, we'd like to see what our church family can do.

So maybe you are still listening to this sermon.

There's an opportunity for us.

We are living in a world that is polarized - it has always been divided over left/right issues, but it has been polarized further by politicians who would rather divide than unite, by members of the media aiming to get clicks (which don't come to subtle, nuanced headlines), and by social media which fuels anger and division by its very nature.

We have developed ways of thinking that train us to look for offense, to assume the worst in others, to react without listening, to be fearful and afraid of anyone *not like me*.

There's a warning given in scripture:

“But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.” - Galatians 5:14

And it seems like that's what's happening all around us - biting and devouring one another, the world is consuming itself.

But this warning wasn't given to those who don't know Christ. This warning was given to the church.

We run the risk of biting and devouring one another within. We get so caught up in our politicized narratives that we move away from our allegiance to our one true King in Jesus.

We can decide where we fit in a political narrative and then attempt to co-opt Christianity into that narrative - which means we never have to listen to facts and truths, and never have to repent. We just have to squeeze Jesus into the opinions we already held.

The ways and teachings of Jesus present a totally different way of living than anything being presented by the world around us right now. The way of Jesus is not the republican way or the democratic way, but a third way altogether. It doesn't fit with the radical left or the radical right.

You can't reconcile the teachings of Jesus with the ways of Antifa, or with the ways of White Supremacy. You can't reconcile the teachings of Jesus with the teachings of Karl Marx or with the identity politics game played by both political parties.

Jesus is against turning blind eyes to injustice, and He is against repaying evil for evil.

While social media stokes divisions, and politicians stoke divisions, while many of us think following their ways toward online gossip and slander might be the right response to the enemy, Jesus presents a third way altogether.

First the Gospel, then the way of life that flows from it:

Colossians 1:21 “21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, 23 if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

So here's the Gospel. We were alienated from God and hostile in mind. We did evil. But Jesus came and died. When he did, he reconciled us to God.

The Gospel message says that Christ gave his life for us while we were still sinners, so that all who would accept His offer of forgiveness and eternal life can have it. He was our substitute on the cross to pay for our sin. If we'll believe by faith in His atoning work for us, we are redeemed and made right with God and brought into a new family of faith.

That's the Gospel.

And the Gospel gets us into heaven, but it also changes everything else.

One of the things it does is reconcile sworn enemies, particularly enemies that were once divided by racial animosity and ethnic identity:

Colossians 3:5-13 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. 12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

So verse 5 has a therefore in it - Jesus has reconciled us to God. He has done the work to make us holy and blameless before God.

Therefore, we put to death the old ways.

Those old ways include sexual immorality, impurity, coveting. They also include lying to one another.

And then in verse 11 when he is reminding us of the new way of life we have, he says that in Christ there is not Greek and Jew, barbarian, scythian, slave, free.

He reminds us that the old way of life includes allowing ethnic identities to divide, and the new way of life doesn't.

We could maybe read this like all of the ethnic identities cease to exist when you become a Christian. But he also says that there is neither circumcised nor uncircumcised. Now that's not something that magically changes when you become a Christian - there are obviously circumcised and uncircumcised Christians. But the point is that that characteristic no longer divides.

So there are obvious distinctly scythians and barbarian Christians, in their day there were slave and free Christians, there were Greek and Jewish Christians. He isn't saying the ethnic identities lose their flavor, he is saying that the *old divisions are gone*.

These things that before divided and created rivalry and bitterness, now exist in a way that provides more beauty. Because our sins against God and against one another have been put to death by Jesus, we can exist together in harmony, not with a loss of characteristics and distinctions, but without animosity.

The cross was the place where the enmity was put to death. The enmity between Jew and Gentile seemed like it could never go away until the blood of Christ was applied to it, but then the blood was applied and they were reconciled.

God reconciles us to Himself in the gospel, and a direct consequence of that is that God reconciles us to one another. And it doesn't say we make that happen. Jesus did it. Jesus, in putting sins to death, put them all to death.

But our calling is to go an act like what's true is true.

And verse 12 says this is how we do that. This really is a guide to living out the racial reconciliation that Jesus has already accomplished. This is what the church does in response to the reconciliation Christ has accomplished.

The world around us has lots of solutions for the divisions. On the one hand there's critical theory¹ that operates from a worldview other than a Christian one to try to solve the problem. On the other hand there's a false theology that tries to pretend there are no distinctions between people and no racial baggage to overcome. We try all kinds of solutions without a gospel foundation, that produce endless and irredeemable divisions and guilt.

But the Gospel offers a solution in putting animosity to death. And from there, it doesn't say to do nothing. It says to actively live in response to what God has done in putting these animosities to death:

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and,

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/incompatibility-critical-theory-christianity/>

if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

This is the guide to racial reconciliation within the church.

Start with compassionate hearts. Hearts that weep with those who weep. Hearts that feel for others. We listen to people as they tell their stories and express what they've been through, not being quick to pounce on the story, but quick to hear.

We are so quick to bite and devour. Compassionate hearts sit and listen to people, they show up in peoples lives when those people are experiencing pain, they have real conversations and at times even push back and correct in helpful ways, but those things don't happen in our five second interactions on facebook, they happen over coffee and meals and in the context of real friendships.

Compassionate hearts don't start with judgment. Sometimes when a friend is upset, you sit with that friend and listen to them, you let them pour out their heart, you aren't looking to correct them. You feel with them and listen.

And as many of our black brothers and sisters are disproportionately feeling the weight of this moments, when white people are invited we sit with them and listen.

We continue with kindness. In Acts 28:1-2, Luke describes kindness:

Acts 28:1 After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. 2 The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold.

Notice how kindness is played out in the book of acts: they kindled a fire and welcomed them.

We are supposed to welcome one another warmly.

And again, this is with people who are are different from - Greeks and Jews, barbarians and scythian, black and white - there is supposed to be in our lives a warm welcome across lines that divide the world, because Christ has put to death the animosity.

And it's worth pausing and asking - in my life is there warm welcome for people that normally I would be divided from? Whether it is a division over race, or class, or urban

and suburban. Is there regular kindness toward people who in some significant way are not like me? We are called to that.

Humility

We have a humble posture toward one another, one that is willing to be taught and to hear and to not assume all the answers, or to assume to know someone's experience better than yours.

Meekness

This is a respectful gentleness.

We have to learn again to communicate with one another. There's an old principle of rhetoric called the principle of charity, which says that we interpret what other people say in the best and most reasonable way, not in the most offensive way possible.

Which is just a matter of loving your neighbor as yourself. Listen to your neighbor as you would want to be listened to.

Someone misspeaking or saying something inadvertently offensive doesn't make them an aggressor or evil. We assume the best of another's intentions, help each other see how what they said could be perceived as offensive.

Patience

We recognize that we all have a long way to go in becoming more like Jesus. And so do all the people around me. Understanding of one another comes with time.

Bearing With One Another

This means sticking with one another for the long haul, in the hopes that we'll become more unified, see more eye to eye, be more like Jesus.

This is so different than the ways of the world that look to be aggrieved, that look for small offenses, that assume the worst. We don't look for more offense in the actions of others, we assume the best of others, we doubt our quick emotional reactions to people.

We assume that for us all to understand one another is going to take a long time and we bear with one another. Because Christ has put to death the old enmity.

if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

It's going to take consistent forgiveness. Meeting face to face when we're offended, listening to one another when one has a grievance, being willing to admit our own mistakes, and then again and again granting forgiveness to one another.

In a world of cancel-culture and one-strike-you're out, in a world that ghosts a person at the slightest offense and quickly leaves their lives and their circles, how beautiful does a Christian community become where we sit down and talk over offenses, where we confess our sins to one another, where we pray for one another, learn from one another, and forgive one another even the really big offenses like the Lord has forgiven us.

As recipients of the gospel of grace, we will automatically become radically gracious, forgiving. As people who have had the Lord move toward us and die for us when we were his enemies, we will automatically become quick to move toward people who become our enemies for understanding and reconciliation.

We can't claim to have all of the answers in our church, we know that some have felt not welcomed because of their race and it grieves us to know that. We continue to strive.

And we will strive as biblically as we can, meaning our tactics for reconciliation can't involve quick rage and ghosting, no conversations, no forgiveness, no confession of sin, no clearing up of misunderstanding, no change in mindset. If it requires no long-term time spent with one another to understand one another and grow toward one another, we aren't living out the implications of the gospel of grace, we are just trying to make Christianity fit into the way we have been disciplined by the world to do things anyways.

Sermon Notes

The Image of God

Genesis 1, Colossians 1 & 3

This summer, issues of murder, race, equal justice, love, charity, and reconciliation are once again in the forefront. Rather than look to worldly solutions, Christians can rely on the Gospel for the motivation for, the template for, and the guide to loving our neighbors well across lines that might divide.

I. The Image of God - Genesis 1:26-29.

God created us in His image. This is an innate characteristic of men and women. What does it mean that we are made in His image? Why is it important to see the image of God in people as innate to their nature as opposed to the result of their behavior?

How must the innate nature of God's image in people affect our view of the unborn? Of those of other races than us? Of those who are elderly? Of those who are severely limited due to physical and mental deformities?

How will this affect how we view people who would commonly be our enemies or rivals? Examples might include those who we differ with politically, groups like the police, etc.

II. The Gospel - Colossians 1:21-23

We are discussing difficult and heated topics. How might the Gospel enable us to discuss them without the normal corresponding rage? How might it affect our interactions with those we differ with?

III. The Guide to Reconciliation - Colossians 3:12-13

Read through this list of attributes we are to "put on."

Sometimes, when discussing topics close to our hearts and painful topics we give ourselves a pass and adopt reasons why we don't need to put these things on. What are some of the excuses we give for our lack of compassion, for example?

Consider the rest of the list. How are you applying these things to people you believe you differ from?

