



Image of God

Genesis 1:27, Ephesians 2:14-21

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Today's scripture first comes from Genesis chapter 1 verse 27. It says this: So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.

And from Ephesians chapter 2 verses 14 through 21: For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. By setting aside in his flesh the law with its commandment and regulations, his purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those of you who were near, for through him we have both access to the father by one spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.

Well, good morning. My name is Becky Bastien. And happy Star Wars Day to those of you who are Star Wars fans. Or in my case, married to one in the back.

Today we're going to talk about how we are all made in the image of God and thereby we are called to affirm people's full humanity. Every person, including those so obsessed with a movie franchise from the 70s and 80s that they would make a holiday that I must celebrate every single May.

Now in all seriousness, I think on the surface level, affirming that we're all made in the image of God sounds easy, right? I think most Christians would check yes, that's one of our core beliefs. It's one of the first things we hear in the Bible about ourselves from God.

And theoretically, I think it's an easy idea to be on board with. However, I think that at times, it can be used as a nice sentiment that actually doesn't impact how we live out our lives.

We're in this sermon series called Life Together, where we believe and we are talking about how we are truly meant to live life together. Now, the picture of community and Paul's letter to the Ephesians is not theoretical. Paul doesn't want the Ephesians to hear this letter, to think, yeah, yeah, community is nice, and then go home and never do anything about it. Not that any of us have ever done that on a Sunday morning. Rather, God is calling them to invest in a new kind of community that for them has never existed before. And it's a community rooted in who they are because of Jesus, rather than a community built around their human identities of ethnicity—excuse me—ethnicity, gender, and culture, that they would have been used to building community around.

Now we see throughout Paul's letters in the New Testament, that issues come up when churches try to really live this out. It's not easy for the early church to blend together Jewish and Gentile culture and to be in community together. In fact, the New Testament is filled with times where this was difficult and churches needed reminders to come back to their mission to being a church for all. And it's still hard, but it's worth it, and it's something we are called to do. And I think that it requires constant reliance on God to help us see people the way that he sees them.

Which begs the question, how does God see us? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? You know, I grew up in the church, and when I heard this phrase thrown around, I thought that maybe it meant that I looked like God. I have my mom's hair and my dad's eyes, and so maybe some part of me and all of us look like him, and that's why it's important. But as I've come to learn more about this phrase and how it's used throughout the Bible, I've come to understand that its importance lies less in whether or not we look like God, but whether or not God chose to give this as a gift to all of us, which he did.

All of us are made in the image of God—not some of us, not those who choose to follow him, not those who pray every day or read your Bible every day—but all of us regardless of age, ethnicity, language, gender, country of origin, college football team alliance, Star Wars fan or not, is made in the image of God. And when we let this sink in and really think about it, it is radically different than how so much of the world functions today. As Paul puts it, we are now fellow citizens in God's kingdom, which means we are being called into a community built around Jesus instead of ourselves.

This kind of community is not common in our world. If you were to go to a coffee shop this afternoon, I imagine the people you would see at tables together know each other because they're related, or they're friends from school, or they're friends from work. These aren't bad places to build relationships, of course, but the kind of community God is calling us to is something deeper than proximity or similarity.

Now, I understand this might feel intimidating, but as Pastor Scott talked about last week, since we are created in the image of God, we are created in the image of love. Scripture tells us God is love. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—God is in relationship and rooted in perfect love. And so this is something we are made for. This is something we are equipped for. This is something we are called to, and this is a place where God comes alongside us when we step towards community.

So what does that community look like?

Well, first, I think it's important to note, this community isn't one where we are trying to be better than others. Ooh, that is hard. How easy is it to start to compare us to other people around us—that we're smarter than the kids sitting next to us in class, that we're a better driver than the car in front of us, that we are a better son or daughter to our parents than our sibling, that we're better at math than the person who got that grade on that test, that we're better at being a Christian than the person next to you, that we're better at following Jesus, that we're better at being humble.

Viewing ourselves as better than others sneaks in so quietly and quickly that if we don't have an eye for it, it can warp how we see the people around us and hurt our ability to truly live into the reality that all people are made in the image of God.

Now, as many of you know, last year, I became a mom, and being a mom is wonderful. However, trying to figure out how to navigate the various parenting advice out there is terrible. It's an absolute headache. I see nods from the parents in the room. And I'm inundated with opinions about everything—from what clothing I should put on her, what food I should give her, how I should parent her, whether or not she should sleep at certain hours of the day. It's constant. And I'm inundated with it because the social media algorithms on my TV and on my phone have figured out that I've had a kid, and so are trying to sell me products with the promise that she could not survive without them. None of them existed five years ago, mind you.

And it would be one thing to just choose amongst the options, but these companies pit parent against parent by saying things, essentially like, you bought your kid a blue ball, and you bought your kid a green ball, so yours is going to college and yours is essentially a failure. I'm truly barely exaggerating, and I found that the judgment starts to sneak into me so quickly when I'm around other parents just because they're making a different decision than I did—even if they're totally good decisions.

This is true in parenting, but I imagine for many of us, it might be true in our careers, in our hobbies, in school, and what we spend our time doing. Comparison sneaks in so quickly.

The Jews and Gentiles in the early church had this exact same problem. For years, they had focused on having little in common, separated by faith, diet, clothing, culture, every part of their lives, and they had spent years thinking that these things that made them different made them better than others. Yet here comes Jesus who dares to say, none of

these things should separate you anymore. Your differences still exist. They aren't bad. They're a part of who I made you to be. But they don't make you better or worse than someone else in God's eyes. And if God's kingdom doesn't have a hierarchy amongst his people, then we aren't meant to build one ourselves.

Second, God is calling us to a community where we don't judge and condemn those around us. This begins early. As many of you know, I work with our elementary kids here at church. And a common question that I get from one child who has just tattled on another child to me is, "Miss Becky, what are you gonna do to them? What's their consequence? What's the punishment?" You see, they would like to grade my response and give suggestions on how to do my job better. As you can imagine, I don't actually govern by committee.

But how often do we do this to God? How often have I prayed and asked for God to show somebody else what they did wrong to me? Too often is the answer.

And I must admit that there are times when I'm annoyed somebody else receives a blessing that I deem them unworthy of, or if I'm being more honest, that I just wish I had myself.

Or are you guilty, like I am, of starting to think less of someone once I find out they believe something different than I do?

Comparison and condemnation are never rooted in seeing the worth and image of God in others.

In the last few weeks since Pope Francis passed away, a lot of people have asked me for my opinion on the Catholic Church or who I think the next pope will be, or just asked me questions because they watched *Conclave* and they want to know how accurate or inaccurate it is. This room too, I see.

Now, the Catholic Church and I have some major disagreements. They wouldn't know what to do with my calling to preach or be a pastor as a woman, and we have some major differences of opinion about big things like the Bible and communion.

But I can respect that Pope Francis lived a life devoted to sharing the Gospel, and because of his relationship with Jesus, had a special care for the poor and the marginalized and children. I learned from his devotion to Christ. It encouraged me in my walk and faith, and I could have missed that opportunity if I was too hung up on the differences that we have.

And while it can be easy to focus on what we disagree with someone on, it can rob us of the community Jesus meant for us to live in.

Third, the community we are being called into rejects the fake safety of isolation. Too often, we can think that safety comes from isolating us from others. Whether that's isolating from people who don't look, talk, eat, believe like we do, or finding ways to isolate our power and money so that we can keep them.

The author Robert Frost has a quote. He said, "Good fences make good neighbors." Well, I have nothing against Frost or the need for important and healthy boundaries in our lives. I would ask, do fences between us in our society make us good Christians?

Now, please hear me. I am the most introverted introvert that has ever introverted. I need time alone every single day and that's how I was created to be. I believe it is a good thing for me. However, I was never meant to live without community.

One of the ways the community has been a blessing to me over the last year or so is by having people who are at different stages of the parenting game. You see, I have a lot of friends who are early in our parenting life, in the first year or two or three, and while we can commiserate on the hard days—with all due respect to my friends—we know nothing.

And maybe the new parents in this room are doing great, maybe you're killing it. I just feel deep within my bones I'm in my rookie year of parenting, and I need all the help I can get.

And so I need those parents who are five, ten, twenty-five, fifty years into parenting, and can speak encouragement and life into me when I'm like, "I have no idea what I am doing." And so much of that advice sounds like this: "Becky, you have to have more grace for yourself. There is no perfect way to parent. All parenting is trying something, seeing how it goes, and then trying something new."

This is perspective and encouragement that I could not gain by reading a book or buying something on the internet, but it is something that comes from having a community of people who are from different life stages than me. And if I was trying to do just life with people who are exactly where I am, I would miss out on this. But also if I was just trying to do it alone, I would also miss out on the promise of good community that Jesus offers us.

Finally, this community is something that we are called to participate in creating. Our mission here at Bellevue Pres is to participate with Jesus in furthering the kingdom of God on the Eastside and to the places and the world he sends us.

And God wants us to be participating truly with him in bringing his kingdom that rejects division in the name of unity in Jesus.

Now, this can be hard to imagine, especially when we think about the divisions of today—Republican and Democrat, Palestinian and Israeli, Russian and Ukrainian, tribal disputes in the Congo, immigrant and citizen, just to name a few.

Yet while it's hard to imagine how we can make a difference, God is inviting us in to participate.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke about this once, talking about the end of apartheid. If you're unfamiliar, apartheid was the racially segregated system created by white South Africans to separate every single aspect of their life—work, school, community—from Black South Africans. It was also a system of oppression meant to ensure that whites had the most access to money, political power, and social status. It lasted from the 1940s to the 1990s.

But the archbishop said this about the end of apartheid: He said, “God saw our brokenness and sought to extricate us from it, but only with our cooperation. God will not cajole or bully us, but wants to woo us for our own sakes.”

And so we must be brave enough to see the divisions when God shows them to us and choose to follow his leading in addressing them.

If we are going to live out the belief that we are all made in the image of God, we don't get to be people who ignore systems or groups who seek to divide us—even when they're within the churches that we worship in.

There's a story from World War II, and I'm just going to honestly tell you that the internet failed me this week as I tried to figure out if the story is true or just a fable, but I think it's useful for us today.

It's a story of soldiers who were deployed in France when one of their comrades passed away. And so they went to a local church and asked if they could bury their friend there. The priest met them and apologized but said only people that had been raised in that church were allowed to be buried in their graveyard. And their graveyard was full, so he couldn't help them. He suggested that they bury their friend just outside the fence of the graveyard.

And while this clearly upset the men, they didn't have a lot of options. And so they went and they buried their friend just outside the fence. They went and slept that night, returned the next morning to pay their final respects. But when they got there, they couldn't find where they had buried their friend.

They looked all around and eventually went to go find the priest to ask him what had happened. And the priest admitted that in the middle of the night, convicted by the Holy Spirit that something had to be done to remedy the situation, the priest had gotten up out of bed and moved the church fence to now include that person within the graveyard.

You see, if we are following Jesus, the destroyer of barriers between his people, we may be called to be fence movers—or even destroyers—too.

And so my challenge for you this week is to ask God where there are fences in your life. Ask him to show them to you. And ask him what he would have you do in response to them.

Is there someone you can eat lunch with who normally eats alone? Do you have a neighbor that you don't know well, but you could start a conversation with? Is there a way you could dive deeper into community here at church by joining a group or signing up to serve? Or maybe it's that when somebody makes a joke about a group of people, you are the person to say something.

This is who God created us to be—made in the image of God, so capable of seeing the worth of others, and with his assistance moving us towards God's kingdom.

Let's pray.

So God, we ask for your help because we cannot do this on our own. We want to see people the way you see them. Open our eyes to the fences in our own life that you would call us to be movers of. Help us to hear you. Embolden us to live a life where we truly know we are created in the image and see that in others as well. We praise you and worship you, Jesus.

Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How has God been helping you to see yourself and others as made in his image? Where is this hard for you?

- In her sermon, Pastor Becky talks about being a fence mover. Where might you be prompted to “move fences?” Where do you have power or influence to do this and how might you step into that kind of opportunity?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we’ve discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.