

In the Image of God

I remember spending a lot of time in front of the mirror when I was in late middle school and early high school. It's not for the reason you might expect – I wasn't overly concerned with how I looked or having the right hair or makeup. I've never been very good at or terribly concerned about those things. I kept looking at myself in the mirror because I was trying to figure out who I was. Were those my dad's eyebrows? My mom's eyes? Where did the shape of my nose come from? What did those features tell me or others who looked at me about what kind of person I was or who I would become? Was I okay or was there something wrong or different about me? Whose image was I made in?

I've spent a lot of time working with teens since I was one myself. I've learned that those questions I was asking weren't unusual ones. I've sometimes been the one on the receiving end of those questions: Who am I? Am I okay? Am I acceptable? Am I worth anything? And sometimes, "What's wrong with me?" Those questions are some of the reasons I love working with middle schoolers, as they get too old to just blindly accept what their parents taught them and begin to learn and discover for themselves. But I also think the answers we get to those questions are answers that stick with us for the rest of our lives. So if we are told, yes, you are wonderful or yes, you are okay and more than okay, those are the answers we carry with us for the rest of our lives. And if we are told, no, you aren't worth anything, no, you'll never be good enough, no, you were made wrong to start with, we carry those answers with us too, sometimes with disastrous results.

The voices that give us those negative answers come from a lot of different places. The pictures we see on TV or social media that tell us what we should look like and make us feel bad when we don't. The bullies in school hallways who make fun of us because we're a little bit different, or just because we seem vulnerable. Messages we get from the adults in our lives that keep playing and replaying in our heads. Those negative answers can so easily

drown out the good stuff that it's hard to believe you really are okay, just the way you are.

That is, until you open the Bible. And there, in the very first chapter, on the very first page in the very first words that we hear about human beings, we learn that we are created in the image of God. "God created humankind in God's own image, male and female, he created them." Not just the man, not just those first two people, but all of us, each one of us is created in the image of God. Poet James Weldon Johnson told the story this way:

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

Think of it. You are created in the image of the one who lit the sun, who created the earth and every living thing. And God's image rests in every human being, in all our wild diversity, because God is way more than any one human could reflect. So God's image is seen in each one, tall or short, old or young, good at art or good at science or good at loving, with all our different hair and skin and body types, with all our different shades of personality and different ways of living. God's image is in each of us, and more than that, in all of us together.

That means that none of us is a mistake. Not one of us is less-than. In the words of a picture that I saw once on someone's refrigerator, a picture showing

a messy, unruly kid, "I know I'm good, 'cause God don't make no junk." It is all of our diversity, all of our variety, that most truly reflects the image of God.

That is very important to hear, because there are some people who have been told, often in so many words, that they are not fully human or that they are God's mistake. This has happened to people who are of different races. In Pride month we especially remember that this has been the case for LGBTQ folk. And here at Tree of Life, we're talking about it because it has very much been the case for people with disabilities. Folks with disabilities have historically been warehoused in institutions, involuntarily sterilized so they would not have children, pushed out of the way so they would be neither seen nor heard. In our schools they have been bullied. In our workplaces they have been rejected as unemployable. Adults with disabilities are treated like children. They will tell you how often people avoid eye contact or don't even bother to learn their name so they are known as the guy in the wheelchair or that kid with autism.

And yet – the image of God is not always great and glowing and glorious. Many years ago, the prophet Isaiah spoke these words about the servant of God:

For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.

³He was despised and rejected^[a] by men,
a man of sorrows^[b] and acquainted with^[c] grief;^[d]
and as one from whom men hide their faces^[e]
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

We Christians have understood this image of this man with no form or majesty, no beauty, despised and rejected to be Jesus of Nazareth. This broken and rejected person is another reflection of the image of God, the Christ who was crucified. Yet this broken, rejected one was lifted up by God, raised to God's

right hand, shining with resurrection light, no longer despised and rejected, but accepted, affirmed and honored.

What happens when we think of the image of God as including the One who was despised and rejected? Who among us is then the closest to the image of God? Theologian John Swinton suggests it includes those with disabilities, people who have no choice but to live with their vulnerabilities front and center for all to see and yet people whose ability to love and to receive love is unimpaired.

Here at Tree of Life, we hold that value front and center. Each person is created in the image of God. That means that they are valued, and accepted and welcomed. And it means that we celebrate the image of God in all the different ways that image is reflected – in me and in you, and in you, and in you and in every person we come in contact with, no matter who they are.