

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on September 19, 2021.

CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27

As I shared with you last week, over the next 12 months we are going to explore the core narratives of the Bible. These are the stories which form our identity as followers of Jesus. They shape the content of the Christian faith. They can give us comfort, direction and hope in our daily lives.

Today we begin at the very beginning, page 1 of every Bible, the first chapter of Genesis. This chapter contains the first story of creation. These thirty-one verses are rich in meaning. It is hard for a preacher to focus on just one message from this passage.

I could talk about creation out of nothing.

God who is outside of creation calls all things into being.

I could focus on the great order of the universe
in its unfolding complexity.

I might have focused on the goodness of the material world.

That evil is not material.

It would be illuminating to ponder the beauty of creation.

The Greek word for good and beauty is the same.

I could speak about God's command to be
good stewards of creation.

Instead I would like us to focus on one of the most radical verses in the whole Bible. In the first chapter of the book of Genesis we are told that **God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.** This verse teaches us a fundamental truth that each and every person has worth. This is the same truth that motivated the founders of our nation to include in the Declaration of Independence the words **"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."** The whole message of the good news of the Bible is built on truth found in creation that there are no little people. All people, males and females, all colors shapes and sizes have worth in God's eyes.

While the Declaration of Independence says that all people are created equal, it is clear that this does not mean that all people are the same. We know from experience that each person has a different bundle of innate gifts, talents, and abilities.

I learned this very early in life when I played Little League. After the tryouts and cuts had been made we started to play games. During our first game, our manager Mr. Lackey decided on a nickname for me. He called me "elephant knees". He called me this because I just could not run with any real speed. I had quickness and good hands that allowed me to play catcher for first base, but I lacked the speed to play the outfield or steal bases. I could try as hard as I might but I just could not run very well. I learned the hard way the sports truism, "you can't teach speed." God did not bless me with the ability to run. I learned I was better on skates.

When it comes to natural endowments we know that people are not created equal. There are people who have been given intelligence and others who need help to care for themselves. There are people with great physical strength and stamina and others who are weak or sickly. There are people who have musical genius and others who are tone deaf. The list could go on and on of the differences and inequalities found in the human condition.

Yet the first chapter of Genesis teaches us that we are fundamentally equal because we are created in the image of God. To God there are no unimportant people.

It is also hard for us to believe that we matter when we focus on the overwhelming power of the universe. The Psalmist pondered this question in the words:

When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou has established; what are human beings that thou art mindful of him, and mortals that thou dost care for them.

The universe is so vast and powerful that the human species would seem to shrink into insignificance. The natural order does not seem to have any concern for individual women or men. We know that great storms will blow ashore without regard for human life. We understand that viruses and cancer attack human bodies without regard for a person's attributes.

The natural world would seem to have little regard for individual men or woman. In the great scheme of things, it would seem that the universe is indifferent to the human race. Yet in the midst of creating the universe, we are told that God created human beings in his likeness and image. God has placed us at the very center of God's creation. In God's eye there are no little people.

What is hardest for most of us to believe is that as an individual we are important to God. You and I know all too well our personal limitations. We look around and can observe the great accomplishments of others. When we look at the great and powerful of the world we are convinced that we will not be able to accomplish anything close to them.

By the time we approach thirty most of us suspect we are not going to become President of the United States and lead the free world. We know we are not going to be the next Tiger Woods. We suspect we are not driven enough to become another entrepreneur like Steve Jobs. We recognize the next great American novel is not buried within us.

Even in our everyday life we come across people who seem to be of more value than we are. There is always someone in school who is a better student or people who do a better job at work. We know people who have a lower handicap at golf or play a superior game of tennis or play their instrument with great skill. We know people who are better parents than we feel we are. And we all know people who are more faithful to Christ.

You and I know our own character faults. We know all too well that we have failed in love. While we might come to accept the truth that human beings in general are important to God. It is not easy for us to believe that we as individuals are of any ultimate worth to God.

Yet each one of us has been made in the image of God. The Psalmist says **we have been made a little less than God and he crowns us with glory and honor.** One truth that

runs from Genesis to Revelations is that God loves each one of us. He cares for you and he cares for me equally. For God there are no little people.

The Hebrew people had to learn this truth. The Jews found God making a covenant with them to be a miracle. Why they wondered should God call them, a small powerless people held in slavery in Egypt to be his people. As one Jewish wit penned "How odd of God to choose the Jews." Yet, this is precisely what God did. He blessed them and used them for his purpose. The Jews learned the truth that they were important to God.

Mary learned this lesson as well. The angel came to her and told her that she was chosen to be the vessel to bring God into the world. Mary's response is found in the words of the Magnificat:

My Soul does magnify the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. Behold from henceforth all generations will call me blessed.

Mary understood that the way we put value on one person over another is not God's way. Mary knew that to God she was as important as kings and queens, for God loved her as much as anyone else.

In our Gospel Lesson for today, Jesus himself says that even the hairs on our head are numbered. God knows and cares about each one of us. He recognizes the worth of each and every human being.

There are many lessons for us to learn from the first chapter of Genesis, but one great truth is clear. Each human person is of infinite value. I know it is sometimes difficult to believe and even harder to put into practice, but each person is of equal worth to our heavenly Father. And this truth leads us to do two things.

The first application of this truth is to inform our communal and political life. Those who have read the first chapter of Genesis will work to insure just treatment for all persons. Each person has worth and should be treated with respect. This is the basic principle on which all interaction with the world is based.

You and I are living in a time of great animosity and turmoil. In our own nation we are living in a time of great polarization. The different sides of the political battles talk about each other and treat each other as being less than human. In the larger world nations and groups kill their opponents as if they had no value at all. In the 19th century there were racists who taught what was called polygenesis. This was the belief that races were created separately and were not equal. The world often seems to act this way contrary to Christian teaching.

Genesis teaches us that God created each and every person with ultimate value. You and I are to treat others, even those with whom we disagree, as persons of worth. Christians are to bring this light into the public square. We should be examples of tolerance and respect. Christian political action, Christian acts of charity, Christian acts of mercy are rooted in protecting the value of every human person. In our daily encounters with other, we must treat them with a love that indicates they are of real worth and worthy of respect.

The second application may even be harder for us.
We must accept ourselves as having value.
We have been created in the image of God.
We have been made a little less than God.

The great Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote many pithy sentences designed to make people think about the meaning of their lives. He once wrote, "**The human race has in the course of generations become ever more insignificant.**" In this quote Kierkegaard was not speaking in absolute terms. He was not implying that human beings over time have lost intrinsic value in God's eyes. What Kierkegaard believed was that we human beings have increasingly experienced our lives as being insignificant. I believe that almost every day you and I endure some treatment that devalues our personhood.

Whenever you deal with a part of any bureaucracy you soon begin to realize that you do not really matter. You cannot even get a human being on the phone. You call and some recording lists numbers to push for different concerns. So often your concern is not one of the options. You just do not matter.

Each day of our lives that we are caught in traffic or stuck waiting in line at a store or on hold on the telephone with music playing, we are reminded that we seem to be just a cog in a large impersonal machine. If you have ever been in the unemployment office or visited county social services, you may know how it feels to be treated as less than significant.

These types of experiences explain much of the anger people feel towards insurance companies, call services and the IRS. They seem to be impersonal organizations to which we just do not matter. Encounters with these forces can make us wonder if we have any worth at all. After all we are just little people. We exist on this planet for just a few short years. We leave this life after three score and ten and the waters of time erase our meager marks on the sands.

The experiences of daily life seem to constantly whisper to us that we are not significant.

The first of the core stories that we learn from Genesis 1 forms the foundation of our faith. In all the narratives about our interactions with God, we are reminded that each and every person you encounter is of great value in God's eyes.

You matter,
I matter,
In God's eyes there are no little people

So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.