

In God's Own Image

Genesis 1:26-31

September 4, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Nearly 30 years ago, my younger kids were in elementary school. Like all other schoolkids, they were bored to death in the summer months. So, I devised a scheme. I challenged them to learn some of the more famous Bible verses by heart, and I paid them in popsicles. Walt was probably a fifth grader by then, and already wanting to be a drummer in a rock band. He turned the 100th Psalm into a rap song:

Make a JOYful NOISE to the LORD all the EARTH. SERVE the LORD with GLADness!

Anna, a second grader, was working on the first verses of the creation story in Genesis 1, and she saw it as the opening of a dramatic and suspenseful movie, with appropriate background music. She even mimicked the pianist playing the spooky notes:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. The earth was without form, and void. And darkness was upon the face of the deep. [bum bum BUM]

I like this approach a lot. Music works better than popsicles to help the scriptures sink into our hearts. I think that maybe we should sing all the Psalms as Walt did, with rhythm and passion. And I love that Anna, even at seven years old, instinctively “got” the deep mystery of the Creation story. Out of nothingness, then from chaos, God brings order and light and life. From silence, God speaks whole worlds into being. It IS dramatic!

The culmination of all this creating comes near the end of the chapter, when God creates humankind in God's own image. Oh, I hope by this point in the story we are not immune to wonder! God has brought forth light and dark; sun, moon, and stars; ocean and sky; plants and animals, all kinds of animals! It is enough to take your breath away. And then, God creates us, and makes us somehow in the image of this Almighty and Creating God. Each of US, carrying some small spark of the divine. And each person everywhere, whether they seem at all like us or not, they carry the image of God as well. That should stop us in our tracks. How can we possibly comprehend such a gift?

~~~

If you have ever been to a yoga class you may have learned to greet your teacher by saying Namaste. Namaste. That word has several interpretations, but the one I love comes, I believe, from the Hindu tradition. Namaste means, “The divine in me honors the divine in you.” It is a perfect balance. Each of us bears that divine spark. Each deserves to be seen and honored. Namaste. “The divine in me honors the divine in you.” What a wonderful way to begin any interchange with another human being, whether we say it aloud or not – just remembering that both you and they are bearers of the divine image!

Jesus famously taught us that when we see people who are hungry or naked or thirsty, we should see Jesus' face in theirs and give them the food, the clothes, the water that they need. We understand this commandment, and in this church, we put a lot of effort into following it. We try to treat others as we would treat Jesus, because we know that they bear the image of God.

But today's scripture reminds us that we, too, bear God's image. I think that is a little harder for us to take in. Somehow, it feels virtuous to place others ahead of ourselves. It is what we were all taught in Sunday School when we were little. But it doesn't feel quite so virtuous to recognize and honor the divine in ourselves. Yet this scripture tells us that God's image is stamped just as surely on each of us as on everyone else. How do we recognize the divine in ourselves so that we can greet others from a place of absolute equality – each of us a child of God? They say that pastors preach the sermons they themselves need to hear, so I want to say that I recognize that what I am about to tell you applies at least as much to me as to any of you.

Thinking of today's scripture, Barbara Brown Taylor, the legendary pastor of South Church in Boston, writes that she decided she finally had to look herself in the mirror, head to toe. This is the body that God has chosen as the home for God's Spirit, God's image, she says. I had better make peace with it. There's a challenge for us for this week. Make peace with our bodies. Stop hating our hair or our skin or our bellies or our feet. Take care of our bodies as best we can, and then just be grateful for them. Stop wishing them to be something other than they are. This week we should all think of our least favorite body part and make peace with it. It is the home of God's Spirit. Let us give thanks for it.

Another way to honor God's image in ourselves is simply to give our spirits room to breathe. Turn off the television. Put down the phone. Go for a walk. Drink in the beauty of this corner of God's great Creation. Say a prayer of thanks. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Read the Bible. Breathe again. Our spirits deserve our care just as much as our bodies do.

Finally, I don't know who needs to hear this today, but it feels important to me to say it: We recognize and honor the image of God in ourselves and others in the balance we maintain in our relationships. Every loving relationship has periods when we give more than we receive, and then a time comes when we get to be on the receiving end for a while. But when a relationship is always one-sided, when the other person never, ever recognizes and honors that divine spark in us, then it is time to speak up, and to honor the image of God in ourselves.

~ ~ ~

"Let us make humankind in our image," God said. And so we were created, earthly creatures carrying a divine spark. What a gift!

Namaste. The divine in me honors the divine in you.

Amen