

“Engaging in Mission”

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Our senior high class has been looking at the question of the image of God. What does it mean to be made in the image of God? It is something that we talk about. It's something that comes right from the beginning of the story of creation. We see, right in the passage we read today, that we were made in God's image. What does that mean?

Scholars have had different ideas about what it means. Some have posed that maybe we physically look like God, but that seems unlikely. Some have posed that it describes our mental faculties - that our faculties are like God. The problem is, it's kind of difficult to tell. What does that mean? Which of our faculties specifically look like God and which are we just kind of reading into Scripture that we think about - how we are different than the rest of creation?

What is more clear is what was the context of the people to whom this was originally addressed. In the Eastern Orient, where this was written, people were familiar with the language of “the image of God.” It was a common phrase to use for a king. A king could be in ‘the image of God’ and, in that sense, the king was the bearer of the Divine rule to the people around them.

When the writer of Genesis was describing God calling us - creating us in God's image - he was using the language that people would understand to mean, people who bare the image of God into the world, people who are the representatives of God into the world.

It goes on to describe our vocation: We were called to have dominion over creation. Now, I remember as a kid trying to figure out what this meant and I thought, “It sounds like, at the very beginning, Adam and Eve were created, and they were gardeners,” and I think that's partly true, but that is far too simplistic. What this was describing, in terms of why we were created - we were created to be in fellowship with God - but we were also created to rule the world for God; to be the ones bringing the reign of God to all of creation. And somehow we stepped away from that vocation. We didn't continue it.

We see, throughout the salvation history, people fell away from God in the next chapter. And, then, God called a family - through the person of Abraham - to be the people of God, to renew this vocation of being the covenant people and restoring God's rule and reign in the world. Finally, when Jesus came, Jesus invites us yet again to renew this vocation of bringing the reign of God into the world.

Now, I'll ask, what does that mean? In the New Testament – specifically – as we were reading this today, it describes, all of creation has been groaning, waiting for the children of God to be revealed. You know a lot of Christianity can be spiritualized to the degree that we understand that God has come into our world to save us spiritually, that we have spiritual needs - but this is something very specific in material. It is describing that all of creation is suffering, because we have not taken up the mantel of being God's people, who are stewards of the world.

One of the examples that I have faced - perhaps you can think - how have we as humanity failed to be stewards of the world that God has sent us here for?

I have shared with you my history at Calvin Crest Camp in California, in the Sierra National Forest. For several summers that camp has been threatened by forest fires. We recently, in talking to some of the forest management people, started preventing forest fires. This actually was a problem for the forest. They said the forest would burn probably about every 20 years, just naturally. When they stopped allowing that, there was logging that went in to thin the forest. But there were groups who were frustrated with that, and it was a difficult thing for us, as people, to attend to this and, in the midst of this, we let the forest become so overgrown that when the fires came, they burned everything down to the ground, and sanitized the dirt, so that it was much, much worse. We, as people, failed to manage that forest. That creation has been groaning, waiting for us to be the stewards God has called us to be.

But, this message is not just an ecological message, or a message about our stewardship of creation. Paul goes on to say that we, too - our bodies - we are groaning, that people are groaning, waiting for the right to be established again.

I shared in my Prayers of the People today something that has been troubling for me this week. It has been troubling for me to read in the paper about the death of the golfer from Ames, Iowa. This woman, with so much promise, who came from another country, to be a student here in Iowa and who was killed needlessly, for no apparent reason. This is a short time following another female college student who was killed here in Iowa, and we mourn the brokenness of this. We live in a world that is difficult and broken, and it stands groaning, waiting for God's work to fix it.

When we look at Jesus ministry, Jesus began his ministry by quoting a passage from Isaiah. He quoted this passage in Nazareth. This is only recorded in Luke, and perhaps you might remember the story. This is the passage that got Jesus in trouble. He was in his home town and he shared this story, and then they tried to stone him, and drove him out of the Temple. This is what he shared. He came and opened the scroll of Isaiah, as it was handed to him, and he read it in the synagogue: *"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of our Lord."*

After he read this, he sat down and he said, *"Today in this reading, this passage has been fulfilled."* What he was saying to them was, "I am the one this passage was speaking of. I have come to proclaim good news to the poor, and sight to the blind, and release to the captives." His ministry was the announcement of the kingdom of God coming to break the chains and heal the wounds.

We have been invited into this ministry of reconciliation. In Colossians 1:20, Paul describes, *"... and through him to reconcile all things, whether on Heaven or on earth."* And again, in II Corinthians 5, *"All this from God through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, that is in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself."*

We were created to be bearers of the image of God, to bring God's reign into our world. We were created to take care of the world, as God would take care of it. When Jesus came, Jesus invited us to join Jesus in this ministry of reconciliation. What does that mean? Reconciling things. Putting things back together. It is both meeting people in need of being reconciled to God, people who stand in need of grace and forgiveness, and mercy and presence and the providence of God. It is also meeting people in need of food and shelter. It is standing against systemic racism and oppression. It is righting those injustices in our world so that the world will begin looking more and more like the world God desired for it to be: it is bringing God's Kingdom into our world.

Now, I grew up in an evangelical Christian setting. I went to an evangelical Christian seminary - Fuller Theological Seminary. I'm the product of the evangelical faith. I'm someone who has deeply appreciated my salvation from sin and my relationship with God.

In the midst of that, I came upon a couple of people who challenged us as evangelicals. One was Brian McLeran, Brian McLeran was a writer and a leader in the early 2000s, in the post-modern Christian movement. People who were seeking to figure out how to be the Church in this new culture, as our world was changing. In class one day, with Brian McLeran, he shared with us, "You know, when I'm talking to college students and teenagers, it doesn't sound like good news for me to say to them, "You can go to Heaven, but all of your friends are going to hell."

In contrast he said, "It does sound like good news when I say: 'You can join Jesus in his work of restoring our broken world.'" That is the good news. That is the invitation of Jesus Christ. Jesus came into our world and called us as Disciples, to join Jesus in Jesus' ongoing ministry of knitting together what is broken in our world.

I had the opportunity last night, to speak with a man who is a representative and leader of the Ethiopian community at the garden. It was a beautiful setting, nice candle lights, music. We had the opportunity to share and hear. One of the gardeners walked me around and showed me all of the different plants that he had gardened, and the gardens that his cousins had also tilled and harvested. He showed me some plants, I think one was called Holy Basil - in English - that they use as condiment. It's like a tea-type thing. They don't eat the leaves, but use it as a spice, then pull it out, but don't eat it.

In the midst of this he thanked our congregation. He said, "I want you to hear how much we appreciate that you have reached out to us." We know that you put a lot of effort and money to create this space for us. But I want to thank you, as a congregation, because not everybody understands who refugees are. We appreciate people like you who do - who welcome us, who give us an opportunity to share our lives with you."

As we were meeting across the table, we were doing God's work of reconciliation. This is the ministry that Jesus has called us to: a ministry of breaking down barriers, a ministry of reaching out to those in need, a ministry of being the love of Christ in our world. You heard from Lisa Anderson earlier this morning, that we continue to seek out opportunities to be the hands and feet of God in our world.

One of things I shared in a staff meeting was that we desire - when we say we engage in mission - we desire to do more and we are invited to do more than fund God's mission. We

are invited and have the opportunity to do more than simply write a check for Lisa Anderson to go and do missions, or for a team to go to Hungary and do missions there. We have the opportunity to participate with Christ in this mission, and that is what we were made for. When we have the opportunity to meet face-to-face; when we have the opportunity to feel the work of God in our midst, there is nothing more eternally satisfying than being used in Christ's ministry.

So, as we engage in God's mission here at Westminster, we are seeking to right the world around us. We are seeking to bring the reign of God into Des Moines and throughout our world - be that sending seeds and fertilizer to our sisters and brothers in South America, be that crossing boundaries of culture with our people in Hungary; be that sitting down with refugees; be that going and meeting with the various different ethnic groups at the family night at Monroe Elementary School and helping them to bridge across the different languages; so we can be of one people together. This is the opportunity that Christ has called us to.

Let us go and be the people that God has led us to be: the image bearers. The ones who bear the kingdom of God into our families and into our world. Amen.