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“In the Image of God”
Colossians 3:10-17

Colossians 3: 10-17: *“Clothe yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”*

In 1851, in Akron, Ohio, someone made the mistake of saying that women were physically weak in comparison to men, and therefore, that women were inferior. It just so happened that a 54 year old former black slave woman was there to challenge the idea. Sojourner Truth raised her 6 foot frame up out of her chair and asserted:

*“That man over there says that women need to be helped into
carriages,
and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere.
Well, nobody ever helped me into carriages, or over mud puddles,
Or gives me any best place, and ain't I a woman?
Look at me! Look at my arm! I've plowed, and planted, and gathered
into barns,
And no man could head me – and ain't I a woman?
I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it),
And bear the lash well – and ain't I a woman?
I've born five children seen most all of 'em sold off into slavery,
And when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me –
None but Jesus heard me – and ain't I a woman?
And that man says that women can't have as much rights as a man*

*'Cause Christ wasn't a woman. Where did your Christ come from?
Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman.
Man had nothin' to do with him.'*

Her words are a powerful reminder that our ideas about God can have a dramatic impact on our ideas of ourselves.

From the beginning of our Bible, in Genesis, we are taught that humans are made in the image of God. But what human? What image? I mean, is Melodi Mosinyi more like God or is Bob Scott? How can it be that Wayne Linder and Carol Reel were both created in the image of God? They look nothing alike!

The Hebrew people called this *imago dei* – in the image of God. All the people on earth are little *imago deis* – all are made in the image of God. But, let's really think about it... surely, there are some who look more like God than others?! Don't you think the face of Charleton Hesston is more God-like than, say, George Burns? And, if we really get down to it, don't you think that the image of God imprinted better on some than others?

This is tricky stuff. It gets at the root of our beliefs and our values. Because, whether we like it or not, most of us have a picture in our mind's eye of what God is. And we don't like it when people mess with God, or our picture of God.

Yet, the Bible gives us a multi-layered idea about the image of God. God is compared to a woman, looking for a lost coin. And God is compared to a father, who welcomes his wayward son back home. God is described as an angry and authoritarian figure and also as a gentle and loving shepherd. God is described as a sexy erotic lover and God is pictured as thundering voice from heaven. God is even called by the female name of Sophia, Divine Wisdom. This sermon is NOT about being politically correct-it's about a theological understanding of God.

I am going to run through a series of human attributes that describe gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and ability and speak to the problems of defining God (and humans) in these categories. I must warn you that some of my words are a bit, well, cynical or tongue-in-cheek-so feel free to giggle with me.

Male. Although sacred literature, namely the Bible, portrays the Divine in a variety of roles, historical cultures have added value and importance to those roles. Traditionally, God has been understood to transcend gender, but the gender randomly assigned to God has been male. "But we all know that the word "man" means both male and female" some say. Except when it doesn't. Why is it that someone saying "God she"

almost always gets an uneasy chuckle but saying “God he” passes right over us?

White. The Renaissance period helped to frame our ideas about Jesus. The famous paintings of Jesus depicted him mostly as an Anglo person. Even if we intellectually know that Jesus was a Jew in the Middle East, it stops us up short to view a picture of a dark-skinned man with a distinct nationality or race other than European. A Mexican Jesus, a Japanese Jesus, an African Jesus, well, it’s a nice idea to help people feel included, but it’s just not quite right. Or is it? If Jesus were depicted as a Middle Eastern Jew in our art, would it impact the Western world’s ideas about Middle Eastern people?

Authoritarian, Ruler, King. The Old English words are so beautifully poetic that it just seems a little irreverent to call God “the dude” or “a cool guy”. No, that’s not respectful. So, we revert to the original language of the Bible – King James – and stumble through the “thee’s and thy’s and thou’s”... but only on Sundays. And we sing about Christ the King and Ruler of all. Does that resonate with people in the United States today? Should our image of God be more earthy than cosmic?

Able Bodied. What would it be like to explore the idea of a crippled God? What if God were in a wheelchair? Would it make God any less God? What if God were dyslexic? Would it make God any less God? Those who live with different abilities ache to know that God has some compassion and justice to offer them. Can the church open its minds to a God who has experience as a differently abled being?

Heterosexual. We all know that God is abstinent from sex. It’s just not godly. But if God were sexual, God would be heterosexual, right?

Rich. God is all-powerful, so it only stands to reason that God is rich. Anyone with power and authority is wealthy. Besides, who wants to come to a church on Sunday to worship a God who can’t even manage to make himself rich? It just doesn’t compute. Unless you are the new pope – Francis. But even he has to deal with the irony of living in the Vatican where there are priceless works of art inside and people begging for food on the steps of St. Peter’s Basilica.

Oh, we could go on for days. The crux of this is that somewhere along the line, we got confused. We read that people were created in the image of God, and we assumed that meant that God was likewise created in images conceived by the human mind.

Why does it matter? Well, because it does. Certainly, God is God no matter how we conceive of God. But the same isn’t true for *us*. We view ourselves based on what we believe about God. We’re *imago dei*’s and we

want to be sure those attributes most like God's are the ones we enhance in ourselves.

How can we love God with mind, heart and soul and love our neighbors as ourselves if we are not quite as *imago dei* as the next person? If the late Michael Jackson truly believed he was *imago dei*, he wouldn't have mutilated his face trying to look more Anglo. Ask any person in a wheelchair and they'll tell you that people speak to the person pushing the wheelchair instead of the one in it as if the lack of lower body strength had anything to do with the ability to think or talk.

In our post-modern society, we have found part of the answer – inclusive language. What it means is that when speaking of people or of God, we try to use language that creates a multi-faceted picture. Therefore, contrary to popular belief, inclusive language isn't about feminine pronouns. To be inclusive means that one attempts to include in his or her examples stories and words that include all people. That means that “dark” and “light” are not the only way we wish to talk about good and evil. Why? Because somewhere along the road, people get mixed up and begin to wonder if dark skin isn't as good, or as Godly, as white skin.

Inclusive also means that the preacher, who in my case is an able-bodied, American, married, heterosexual woman, parent and mother, tries to use stories and examples which are not always specific to able-bodied, American, married people, heterosexual women, or mothers. I can use examples from my experience, of course. I just don't use them exclusively.

So, will you be in trouble if you call God “he” or “Father”? Not at all. That's Biblical and legitimate. Likewise, if you call God “she” or “Mother”, it will be accepted. That's Biblical and legitimate. Our Bible has countless positive examples of God's feminine traits.

But inclusive language is so much more than this. When I first began using inclusive language, it was against my will. It's true. I said no one could ever talk me out of my understanding of God as my Heavenly Father. (Just goes to prove that you may end up eating words when you make declarations like that.) My seminary had as its policy that all written work submitted to the faculty had to use inclusive language. Otherwise, it was an automatic failing grade. I began seminary very unhappy about this policy and pretty resentful. But as I passed the awkward stage of new language, I began to realize that I was seeing God in a new light. My concepts about God were expanded. My prayer life was enriched. My understanding of scripture was opened up. New ideas and concepts began to form. I developed more complete and powerful ways to relate spiritually. Not only did I understand God differently, I was able to see people (including myself)

differently too. Our children and grandchildren deserve to know that they are imago dei regardless of their skin tone, ability, social class, or gender. And our choice of words makes a BIG difference.

Frederick Douglass once said, “I sometimes forget the color of my skin and remember that I am a man. I sometimes forget that I am hated of men, and remember I am loved of God.” Let it be so for all of us. Amen.