

“Seeing a Part of God in Each Other”

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

June 7, 2020

As many of you know, I have participated in a good bit of partnership mission work, especially with CBF field personnel Sam and Melody Harrell in Kenya. Sam is now Associate Coordinator of Global Missions for CBF, but he and Mel have not lost their love for Kenya, and many of the projects they began continue to give witness to God’s love by addressing great needs with a focus on transformation.

I have many wonderful memories of my time in Kenya, as well as many painful ones, given the scope of poverty in some parts of that beautiful land, but I think today of a worship service in Sisit in 2012. Some of us from First Baptist joined Kristen Muse and some Hayes Barton members on a trip where we spent some time in Sisit. In addition to working with members of the community to finish a bridge there, we shared in a time of worship and were fed a fabulous meal that included goat, probably one of the cute goats we had seen earlier in the day...

Anyway, the service began with singing and words of testimony. I knew Kristen was going to preach — she is fine preacher and we wanted them to experience a woman preaching — so I settled in and enjoyed the singing until Sam leaned over to me and said, “You know, Chris, they know you are a pastor; so, they will expect you to preach too.” “Oh,” I said, thinking to myself, “Oh!” They expected me to preach, not later in the week, not that evening, but in this very service that had begun!

It’s not that I have ever been bashful about speaking, but I generally have some time to prepare. There is a story about Abraham Lincoln being asked to speak on short notice. Before he answered, he asked how long they wanted him to speak. When they asked why this mattered, he said, “If you want me to speak for an hour, I can do it now, but if you want me to speak for ten minutes, I need time to prepare.” That is how it works. Preparation allows for more focus and less rambling, less time for the horse to circle the barn before entering.

But I had very little time to prepare, the time a little more singing and testimony took. We were being translated, and that would help me. I could gather my thoughts while the translator worked, even poke a little fun at him for saying a lot more than I had said in English. But it was a challenging moment, though a meaningful one, an opportunity to seek the Spirit's guidance and connect personally with people there.

What I ended up preaching was a brief sermon based on today's reading from Genesis. Scripture says we are made in God's image, I said, all of us are made in God's image. This means that each of us reflects a part of God's character — not perfectly, we have flaws, we all blur God's image — but still we reflect a part of who God is. Thus, every person we look at, no matter how much they are like us or different from us, is made in God's image and thereby reflects a part of God.

How we treat each other, therefore, how we treat all people, takes on much greater significance. When we value another person and see dignity in that person, we value and see the dignity of God. When we devalue another person in any way, much less discriminate against or harm them, we disrespect a part of God. Thus, the calling to love our neighbor is inextricably linked to the calling to love God.

That's all I said that day — it was a short sermon, there was going to be another sermon and we had a meal to share — and that is all I have to say today. I just want to ground these words a little deeper in the text and apply them to current realities of wrongdoing, racism and protest.

We know this text or at least think we do. God creates a world in six days and rests on the seventh, declaring it all good or very good. We often say it is one of two creation stories in the Bible, but there are actually seven — two in Genesis and one each in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Isaiah. Old Testament scholar William Brown's book *The Seven Pillars of Creation* explores each narrative and then examines the ways in which scientific learning relates to each.

Science and religion ask different questions. Science wants to know how and when the world begins while religion wants to know who creates the world and why. These two paths to understanding are

complementary; they are not in conflict. And religion, at least our religion, claims that One God creates and is responsible for the whole world. The Genesis 1 narrative is masterful and complex, but the essence of the story is that while God creates the whole world for intimate fellowship with God, human beings are created with a special purpose. We alone are made in the image of God. But what exactly does this mean? What sets us apart from the rest of creation?

The common answer is that we have a soul, but this is not what the text says. In Hebrew thought, we do not have a soul. If there is such a thing as a soul — and this is disputed; our own Elmo Scoggin said there is no such thing in Hebrew thought — but if there is such a thing, we do not have one, we are one — an embodied being, essence or soul. And whatever we are, the animals are too in the Hebrew.

So, what makes us different if it is not the possession of a soul? What is often translated as “dominion” but might better be understood as “responsibility” — the responsibility to care for creation with God. We are not given a mandate to exploit the earth for our own benefit which would be counterproductive anyway. We are given a calling to exercise stewardship over the earth. This is what sets us apart.

Moving beyond the text, Francis Collins, former head of the Human Genome Project, current head of the National Institutes of Health, and a devout Christian, says that *Homo sapiens* distinctly have a sense of right and wrong, a developed use of language, an awareness of self, and the ability to imagine the future. These things make us different, but he adds that it may be just a matter of degree in each area.

Building on this concept, William Brown says that “it is best to think of the *imago Dei* not as something that reflects a singular aspect of the divine off a singular aspect of the human but as a prism refracting the various ways human beings, beginning with their gendered diversity, are capable of conveying the manifold character of God in the world (*The Seven Pillars of Creation*, p. 76).” In other words, none of us can reflect the whole of God’s character, but we are each made in the image of God, and thus we each reflect a part of who God is.

That's what the text says, and it means that there is more at stake in how we treat our neighbor than we might think. So, how does this truth apply to current realities of racial and political tension? In regard to how we treat people of color, women, and many other people, it ought to make us feel uncomfortable. For in not fully valuing certain lives, we are dishonoring the God who made them and is seen in them.

Our Declaration of Independence says that all men are created equal, but what this meant in 1776 was all *men*, not women, and actually only *all white men who owned land*. Women were not guaranteed the right to vote until 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment. Native Americans were not included; efforts were made to exterminate them. And African-Americans have a dismal history here with the first slaves arriving in 1619, 401 years ago. It has been 157 years since the Emancipation Proclamation, 155 years since the 13th Amendment which abolished slavery, 150 years since the 15th Amendment which prohibited the denial of voting rights because of race, and 56 years since The Civil Rights Act which many white southern Christians opposed.

What this history tells us is that efforts have been made to honor the dignity of all human life, but progress has come very slowly; no single piece of legislation has changed human attitudes and behaviors; most all, persons of color have suffered discrimination for a long time, and such a period of hardship, even with advances, is oppressive.

Think about how frustrated we have been with the isolation and economic hardships brought on by COVID-19. I understand the anger of people who have driven their cars around downtown honking their horns, demanding the reopening of North Carolina, even if I disagree with their demand. I understand the frustration. It has been 13 weeks! But it has been 13 weeks. Imagine how frustrating it would feel if we had suffered oppression for 401 years! Current inequalities are not the same as in the periods of slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, or pre-Civil Rights. But inequality still exists, racism still poisons the structures and systems of our society. Just because we don't use the "n" word or deny someone entrance to a restaurant does not mean the issue is resolved.

We have seen evidence that people of color are treated differently yet again over the past few weeks in the experiences of George Floyd,

Breeona Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. Mistakes can be made, people of all races have lost their lives at times, but these were not just mistakes and certain people, especially people of color, are much more likely to suffer wrongdoing, often at the hands of authorities.

Let me be clear. When it comes to law enforcement officers, the vast majority are wonderful, self-sacrificing servants of our community and nation. We depend on them, we owe them a debt of gratitude, and we have gotten to know some at our church. The fact that some officers do hateful and criminal things must not distort our view of all officers. They too are made in the image of God, and many of them around the nation have kneeled with protestors in recent days.

But the fact that the vast majority of LEO's are wonderful does not mean there are not problems within law enforcement — not just some bad apples, but systemic issues that affect the way we treat others, and often a lack of leadership to address problems when they arise and take action. In regard to the latter, law enforcement is not the only institution that has lacked leadership. How many churches have identified clergy misconduct and refused to take action, thus enabling the misconduct?

But in regard to the central issues of race, I confess that I have to fight back my cynicism about the prospects for change. When the riots erupted in Los Angeles in May, 1992 after the Rodney King verdict (and let me add that violence, vandalism and looting have no place in a peaceful society, no matter how understandable the anger behind them may be), it felt like this was a watershed moment. That Sunday was the only time I completely changed a sermon based on something that happened Saturday night. But while the LA police department made significant changes that have endured to this day, little changed anywhere else. It was like so many tragedies involving mass shootings where there is a groundswell of emotion for a time, but nothing changes.

Yet in this moment I see hopeful signs — in the officers who kneel with protestors; in the mayors, governors and other leaders who seem to get it; in protests like the one many of us participated in on Wednesday lining Hillsboro Street simply holding up names or concerns on signs. It was a mostly white crowd, but the sight was moving, especially when black or brown people drove down the street, honked their horns, and

rolled down their windows, shouting, “Thank you!” Thank you for listening, for caring, for getting it... Someone has said that justice will never be experienced until those who are not affected directly by injustice are just as outraged as those who are. Indeed.

Justice is a biblical concern, no matter how many times people in power try to say it is not, and racial justice is a central Christian concern, even though the southern church opposed this reality for centuries. Justice is just the way we express love beyond the individual level. Seeking racial justice is one way we love our neighbor who is different from us and yet still is made in the image of God, still reflects a part of who God is. We may differ on exactly how to respond to some specific manifestations of struggle today, but surely we can agree on this much. As long as we do, there is cause for hope.