

Loving God's Image Everywhere

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Months ago, I selected this Sunday to speak on the sanctify of life and the sanctity of race. We are in the midst of a cluster of special days—Sanctity of Life Sunday, Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, and Black History Month. It seemed an appropriate time to address this. Little did I know how timely the message would be.

What do I mean? Last week the governor of New York signed into law legalizing abortion for any reason up to the moment of birth. It is allowed for any reason including "age, economic, social, and emotional factors." This was celebrated and they even lit World Trade Center One in pink.

A few days ago, Virginia attempted a similar measure. The governor of Virginia, himself a physician, explained on a radio station in calm and cavalier tones that this law would allow a child to be born, and even after the birth, the mother and doctor could decide whether to sustain the child's life or take it. Today's headlines include this same governor in alleged racist actions in his past.

What about race? That's the other thing constantly in the news as our country continues to wrestle with ethnic diversity, ancient sins, and loving our neighbor no matter their color, as ourselves.

Whether you know it or not, Bethel Church is knee-deep in both these matters. Advocating for the unborn has a long legacy here primarily by supporting the Women's Center of Northwest Indiana. We do this through our general budget, but also through special events, volunteers, and close relationships. A few years ago, we provided funds to establish the first ever Crisis Pregnancy Center in the city of Gary (see below).



We are also walking down the path of racial diversity. Many years ago, we challenged our church that we will know we are reaching our community when we ethnically look like our community; ethnically represent the people around us. This led in part to what we called Mission Them and a host of initiatives including campuses in other communities.

By reaching into different communities, we have reached into different cultures and demographics, most vividly our Gary campus, which is currently around 60% African American, 30% white, and 10% Hispanic. This has been a learning curve for us. A curve we continue to be on.

Lord willing, within the next three months, we will take another huge step in gospel diversity by beginning our first language-specific congregation. The Bethel Chinese Church seems to likely be opening by Easter this spring. How will we do embracing, loving, and seeking understanding of the Asian culture? It's exciting and challenging in ways we don't even know yet.

We have a long way to go with all this. How do we get there? By reinforcing and living out the biblical call to love God's image everywhere it is found—in the womb, out of the womb, in both genders, in every language, culture, and color. This leads to today's message entitled, *Loving God's Image Everywhere*.

All Human Life is Sacred Because it Bears God's Image

I would hope all Christians would say yes to this, but do we know why? Do we know why we recoil in horror at a mass murder like Sandy Hook or Las Vegas? Why should we recoil in horror at the thought of a mother and doctor discussing whether to keep or destroy the newborn infant? Here's why:

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it." (Genesis 1:27-28 ESV)

In the very first chapter of his book, God lays out who he is and who we are and how our purpose and value are derived from God. God created man *"in his own image."* What does that mean? **It means human life is unique.** God created everything else in the universe, and nothing else is given this sacred distinction.

Here we need to see the unique dignity and honor that God gives to human life. Bearing God's image means that human beings have more likeness to him, more in common with him, than anything else in all creation. All the galaxies. All the herds of migrating animals in Africa. All the birds. All the atoms and molecules. All of them reflect the glory of God and say something about his divine nature (Romans 1:18-20). Yet, there is more of God's likeness in one human being than all the galaxies combined.

Every human being is a moral and spiritual being. We have a soul with relational and spiritual capacities unique to us and God. We are moral and morally accountable to God unlike any tiger or mosquito is. Although in my opinion, mosquitoes should be judged. Our value is a derived value.

Here's how this works. The more glorious and valuable we see God to be, the more treasured his image is. Because we love our children, we value their image in pictures and

videos. We love them, so we love their image. If we love God, we will love his image wherever and whoever it is.

What happens in a society that doesn't highly value God? The value of his image is diminished. What happens when a society denies the existence of God? They approve destroying his image even after it's lying alive on the birthing table. When we value God, we treasure human life. When we don't value God, we don't treasure human life.

How does this relate to ethnicities? I hope it's obvious that all human races and ethnicities share the same image bearing and therefore share the same worth. In fact, science and genome studies have affirmed there is only one human race. Genetically, we are all essentially the same.

Same problem

Since there is only one human race then what God says about us applies the same to all of us. Here Romans eloquently explains that we all have the same problem:

- *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."* (Romans 1:18)
- "As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one." (Romans 3:10)
- *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3:23)

If misery loves company, we all should love each other greatly because we all are dealing with same moral plague. Sin and condemnation by a holy God.

Let that sink in for a moment. Every human being, no matter their age, skin color, or other category, is a soul made for God. Apart from God's gospel and grace, every soul is destined for hell. That guy on the street, that girl across the hall, that executive, that artist, that mommy. It's an astonishing and sobering reality. We all share the same problem. Like cancer victims in the cancer ward look at each other through sympathetic eyes, there should be a heart of compassion we feel for every image bearer we come across. We share the same problem, and wonderfully, we share the same solution.

Same Solution

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1)

God's solution to our problem is not better government or education, it is the cross of Jesus Christ. The ultimate reconciliation is God's reconciliation with us by sending his Son Jesus. Think about this with me a moment. Aren't we glad God isn't a racist? Aren't we glad divine privilege didn't keep Jesus from coming to us? Aren't we astonished that God would move into our neighborhood and love his neighbors? All the things we wish were true in others are completely true in God. He didn't save from a distance, he saved up close and personal. God is no racist and he came to save the whole human race. If there is a symbol that should represent freedom and justice across all ethnicities it should be the cross of Jesus Christ.

It's awesome to think that as Jesus hung on the cross, the guilt that he bore was multiethnic guilt. He didn't just bear the guilt of the Jews. He didn't just bear the guilt of the

Romans. He didn't just bear the guilt of Middle Eastern people. He bore the guilt of every single skin color and ethnicity that has ever lived. He died a multiethnic, redeeming death, bearing multiethnic sin, including racism, when he died on the cross.

Same destiny

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.'" (Revelation 7:9-12)

Here is the future for all of God's people. Heaven is a multiethnic, multicultural, incredibly diverse, redeemed humanity fully united in joy and worship of Christ. The Bible could have just said Christians are around the throne. But notice that it emphasizes the diversity. Every nation. Every tribe. Every people. Every language. Heaven is the perfect reflection of God's will and God's will is a diversity of human ethnicity perfectly united in heart and soul.

Now there's diversity in hell too. But there is no unity. Hell is diverse ethnicity and no love. Diverse ethnicity and no unity. Which is America resembling? Which does your heart resemble? Heaven is the church fulfilled and matured. It began at Pentecost where people from various nations heard the gospel in their own tongue. It continues through the centuries with gospel and evangelism expansion. It is only fulfilled when Christ himself sits on the throne of his kingdom. There we are not citizens of the US or France or Kenya. There we are eternally happy citizens of the eternal kingdom of God.

You do realize you have far more in common with a Chinese or Brazilian Christian than you do with a fellow non-Christian American? And it's not even close. There are no "Americans" in heaven.

How Do We Love God's Image Everywhere?

Personal repentance of failure to love God's image everywhere

What is the opposite of loving God's image everywhere? Racism. Prejudice. Partiality in relationship that only cares for people who look like me or come from my background.

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." (1 John 4:20)

I remember over 20 years ago, very early in my ministry here, I was first confronted with Northwest Indiana racism. I was teaching on 1 John and said racism is hating our brother. Someone in the Bible study said, "You don't know what it's like to live by them." Air went out of the room. I had only been here around three weeks. New pastor. New church. Want to make a good impression. What to do? I took a deep breath and called out their sinful attitude. By the way, we will continue to call it out. My observation is that there are many people who are very concerned about abortion but are OK with low levels of racial discrimination. Do you see the hypocrisy? You can't say you care about God's image in the

womb and be racist toward his image outside the womb. Do we believe that enough to not tolerate the whispering jokes and condescending attitudes?

What about the woman here today who has an abortion in her past? What do we say? We say the same Bible that condemns our sin urges us to the grace and forgiveness of God if we confess our sins. We say, take comfort, you are right here sitting next to many liars, cheaters, and racists. The gospel is for sinners. Perhaps you're the boyfriend of the past who abandoned a woman you impregnated. The parent who urged the abortion to cover an embarrassment. What to do? Repent and find grace with God. We must first be reconciled to God, then turn that same loving reconciliation toward our fellow human.

Personal involvement in loving God's image everywhere

"Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." (Psalm 82:3-4)

God's care in Scripture is for all people. Our care should be the same, so this is no permission to be prejudiced against rich or powerful. They need Christ too. Tim Keller points out that there is no Scripture that calls us to stand up for the rights of the rich or the powerful. Why? They are presumably in circumstances where they can do so for themselves.

We are called to give justice to the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable. Why? They aren't in positions where they can take care of themselves. When we love and care for people in these categories, James says its pure religion. Why? Because they have nothing material to offer us. It's a check on our motives.

"Give justice." Give means do something. Not passively avoiding racism, but actively doing something. All of us can do something. Like what?

- *"Honor everyone."* (1 Peter 2:17)
- *"...To speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people."* (Titus 3:2)

These are attitudes. What is your heart attitude toward people who are different from you? Honor? Courtesy? Love? How do you talk about communities like Gary? Pastor Dexter, our campus pastor in Gary, has shared with me how subtle comments from our people about Gary are hurtful for our church members who live there. People in Gary desire the same things we all desire and they are doing life with all the same hopes and dreams. Honor. Respect. Courtesy. We can all do that.

To say it another way, as Martin Luther King, Jr did, *"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."* That quote is engraved in stone because it is God's truth first.

How about true Christian hospitality? Accepting others as Christ has accepted us. How would an ethnically different person, let's say a purple person, feel if they visited one of our campuses? Who extends the hand? Who asks about them personally? Who invites them to coffee or dinner? Would a purple person find the same relational openness that they observe is offered to non-purple people?

This goes well beyond onsite church stuff. Do you ever have people over to your home who are different from you? How long has it been? How are you loving God's image everywhere?

How about loving little image bearers? Today members of our church, the Vander Meer family (see below), are in Indy at Riley's children's Hospital.



They are members of our church involved in foster care. Their foster child Silas was born premature. He is only one month past his due date. He has some serious complications. They have 5 children of their own. They have been there since Wednesday and are facing another week living at the hospital. Why do this? Little Silas is an image bearer. That's personal involvement. Foster Care. Adoption. We have several families who adopted different from their ethnicity. Let's see them as little pictures of heaven running around. Supporting the Women's Center is a way to love God's image everywhere.

Are you ready to be involved and inconvenienced? These things come at unexpected times. Some time ago a member of our church, we'll call him Chris, was hanging with his nephew who is in the army. In the course of the conversation his nephew shared that there was a girl in his division who was pregnant and planning on having an abortion the next day. Chris asked, "Have you talked to her?" He said, "Yes, she's bound and determined to terminate the pregnancy." Chris had his nephew call her and then the nephew handed the phone to Chris. Chris asked her kindly to reconsider the abortion and offered her \$1000 on the spot, no questions asked, if she would deliver the baby and keep it or give it to another family for adoption. They spent two hours on the phone. He didn't debate her or condemn her. Chris and his wife simply tried to provide solutions for her problems. The woman decided to keep the child and little Logan was born healthy and today is five years old, loves Mickey Mouse, and is expecting a baby brother in a few months.

What beautiful story might God allow you to be a part of as you purpose to love God's image everywhere?

Our church is trying imperfectly to love God's image everywhere. Yes, with missions around the world, but we have the world on our doorstep. For us to do this, the culture of our church must be very comfortable with God's image in all its diversity. This will not be easy, and occasionally, it will be messy. But it's worth it. I have a dream too... that Bethel Church will be more and more a little slice of heaven on earth where these diversities are less tensions and more celebrations as we love God's image everywhere.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016)*.
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