



Genesis 1:26-31

26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."
 27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
 28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."
 29 Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.
 31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Ephesians 1:15-23

Thanksgiving and Prayer

15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit[a] of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the

The Head and the Body

hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength 20 he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. 22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

I GREW UP IN A RELIGIOUSLY EVANGELICAL AND FUNDAMENTAL TRADITION, and one of the things I was taught from the moment I could understand anything about God, was that I needed to cultivate my "personal relationship with Jesus."

Before I go on, I want to say that I am grateful, in many ways, for my upbringing. In particular (and I'm sure all my ex-Southern Baptist friends in the group will agree with me on this), I am grateful I was taught to take the Bible very seriously and to develop a sense of personal piety. However, what I am not grateful for was the over-riding message I received of "Christian individualism." This idea of a "personal relationship" was, of course, meant to emphasize that we (each of us) have a direct line to God. You can pray to God. You don't need someone like me, a pastor, to pray for you. I'm not any more holy than you are. Maybe Joann, Victor, and Marci are, but I assure you I'm not.

Something that went along with that is the idea that every Christian was to fend for themselves. In this pastor's opinion, that idea has had disastrous consequences for humanity. If my life is hard and if I am responsible for fending for myself with God, then it's *my fault* if God doesn't respond to my prayers for help. And then we start to have this idea that there are some people who are more *holy* than others, which quickly turns into some people are more *worthy* than others, and we all know what happens when one group of people thinks they're better than another...

Connected to that, it is also disastrous when we believe we must fend for ourselves if, for no other reasons, than the simple fact that we limit our ability to grow as disciples. If I am solely responsible for my

growth as a disciple of Jesus, then I am toast. I *need* others to grow. Just yesterday, I led the study of some scripture with your Deacons and Elders. A group of us talked through a passage of scripture together, and, as *always* happened whenever I do this, I left with a new insight into God's word because I read that passage with others people. All of us are smarter than one of us.

I like to say that reading our church constitution, the *Book of Order*, was a conversion experience for me. After a lifetime of being taught I was on my own, I was thrilled to discover there was a church who believed that we discern the mind of Christ and the will of God together in groups. In short, Presbyterians do not believe we can be Christians by ourselves. I believe this is how God intended it.

"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness..." Genesis says. In the great story that is the story of the people of God, this is the first mention of human beings. Our very first entrance onto the scene is God saying, "Let's make them like us." It is undeniably true that God is God and we are not, but it is a profound idea that our very existence is modeled on God's.

What does it mean to say that we are made in God's image and likeness? Well, for starters, we have to recognize that this discussion of our creation and who we would be, is the result of a *group decision*. Did you catch that? There it is, plainly in the words of the Bible: "Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness..." We always say we are "made in the image of God," but I fear we have limited ourselves in our understanding of that truth.

In the ancient world, the common understanding was that there was a *pantheon* of gods. If you've read any sort of Greek myths, then you have the concept. Each people had their gods. Each place had its gods. What we see, here, in our reading from Genesis is ancient understanding that humanity had relationships with multiple deities (This is not the only place in the Bible where a "council of gods" is suggested).

Now, as Christians, we don't have that understanding. Along with our Jewish and Muslim siblings, we understand that there is one God. What separates us from our religious family members, however, is that we speak of this "one God" as a "God in three persons." The Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—this is the name into which we baptize, the name by which we do all things. Could it be that this is what is meant by "Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness..."? Is Genesis speaking of the Trinity? Perhaps. But we'll never know.

Regardless, I'm not sure it matters. Whether it's a council of gods or the Trinity, one thing is certain: *Humankind was made in the image and likeness of a divine community*. "Let *us*..." Our very nature—the very first foundational idea of who and what we are—is based on and in community. We are meant for one another. We are a *part* of one another.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that the church is Christ's body. By this point, Paul has been talking about and writing about "the Body of Christ" for about 10 years (after he first wrote to the Corinthians), and the idea is a familiar one to us: *We are all connected, and we are all important to the work God is doing in the world*. Each one of us is integral to the process. If even one of us suffers indignity—if even one of us is denied our rights as people of inherent worth—we have to attend to them, because the work of spreading Grace, Peace, Love, and Justice cannot be done without that person.

That has been known and understood, but now Paul adds a new layer to the metaphor: *We are the body; Christ is the head*. The body does what the head instructs. That's the way it works.

Think about your own body, and how you make it do things it might not want to do. This body has high blood pressure, and this body wants to sit on the couch, drink beer, and eat fried foods and ho-hos. That's what this body wants to do. And there are times this body gets to do that. But most of the time, this body does not eat the fried food and this body goes and exercises. Because the head instructs the body.

Likewise, *Christ instructs us*. What we do and who we are is determined by Christ as head of this body of Christ.

What I cannot get over as read and reread this passage of scripture is how Paul makes clear that we are an integral part of what God is doing in the world. Not "you," not "me," (as individuals) but "we." When the head instructs the body, all parts of the body have to work in concert *for the benefit of the entire body*. Part of what Paul wants to do in this portion of the letter is lift up and celebrate the Ephesians' understanding of this.

He tells them he continually gives thanks for them because he has heard of all the ways they have shown love to all the saints. Unlike a lot of letters of Paul, he's not going to name individual people to lift up. He is wanting to celebrate the church as a whole. "You *all* did this," he's saying. "Not one of you, but all of you." Part of what he wants to do is make sure they know how thankful he is that they are unfailing in their spreading of the Grace, Peace, Love, and Justice of Christ.

Calvary, like Paul with the Ephesians, I do not cease to give thanks to God for you, and I want to take this moment for you to hear what an incredible community you are. Like children who overhear an

adult bragging about them, I want to give you a chance to “overhear” a few things your pastors and others say about you.

I first knew about you as I became involved in the work of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (eventually joining the board, alongside your pastor, Marci). You should know that countless people all across our denomination give thanks to you for housing the offices of the Network for so long. Because of your generosity and faithfulness, the work of the Network all had a place to reside, and the work of justice and equity for LGBTQIA+ people was nurtured. On behalf of so many people across this country, and, most importantly, several of my own children, I do not cease to give thanks to God for you.

When people say, “Tell us about Calvary and what you all are doing” your pastors talk about how your youth came back from a mission trip and start a domino effect resulting in you creating partnerships with organizations who are addressing the root causes of poverty. You not only contribute financially, but you show up physically.

When your pastors want to brag on you, they tell of your decision to become a sanctuary church. They tell of how, one week after making that decision and proclaiming it to the community, you were given a chance to serve siblings in need of your strength and love. You didn’t just use words, you put your love in action.

Friends, this is who you are. I don’t know what story you tell yourselves about this place, but you *have* to know the story people tell about you. Yes, absolutely, you are committed to transforming lives on the corner of Fillmore and Jackson (and this is where your focus should be) but the witness of your life has effects in other places. Hearing of how God is working in and through you has inspired and affected what we have done at Westminster church in Oklahoma City and I know we are not the only ones.

So keep the faith, friends. Keep seeking after Christ and his Grace, Peace, Love, and Justice. It is hard to be a church right now, but it has always been hard. These times are different, but they are not unique, and congregations like Calvary continue to give so many others hope that Christ *is* alive and that God’s spirit *is still moving*.

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.” As Paul writes in our passage, I pray that the eyes of our hearts continue to be enlightened, so you can see the amazing things Christ, as head of the Church, is directing you to do.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

