

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Genesis 1:26-28; 9:1-7

Second Wednesday in Lent

February 29, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

I'm going to cheat a little bit tonight and use two Old Testament lessons, although I think you will see that they are very much connected. The first is Genesis 1, verses 26 through 28, and the second is Genesis 9, verses 1 through 7. The first is God's command to Adam and Eve after he created them. The second is God's command to Noah and his family after he delivered them through the flood. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Genesis 1, beginning at verse 26, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

^{9:1} And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. ² The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. ³ Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ⁴ But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵ And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

⁶ "Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.

⁷ And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This year for the Lenten sermon series, we're going to be considering the Ten Commandments. Now, if it feels like we've already done this, it's because we have. Five years ago, when I began using the Small Catechism for these midweek services, we started with the Ten Commandments, and we covered all ten of them in five weeks. But, it turns out, you all keep sinning. That's a joke, so I hope you're not too offended. But, you know, some jokes are true. And I keep sinning too. So last year, after going through the entire catechism in previous years,

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we started over with the Ten Commandments again, and instead of doing all ten in five weeks, which felt rushed, we slowed down and went through the introduction and the first four. This year we'll finish five through ten.

Now I don't know about you, but for me, I've really enjoyed studying the Ten Commandments. And the reason is that, when you really take some time to sit down and think through them, there's a whole lot more goodness and kindness in them than I previously thought. And I kind of like those discovery moments when you realize something that you never noticed before. Do you remember that old Campbell's Soup commercial, with the boy eating a bowl of chicken noodle soup? And he says, "Hey, I never knew there was chicken in this soup." The Ten Commandments are kind of like that. If we don't give much thought to them, they seem restrictive, perhaps even repressive. It's a list of all the stuff we can't do. But if we start with the gracious character of God, and if we consider why he has given these commandments, we might just say, "Hey, I never knew there was kindness and freedom in these commandments."

Now, I hesitate to say that they're filled with grace or that there's Gospel in them. We certainly want to maintain our distinction between Law and Gospel. The Law tells us what we must do, and it accuses us when we break it. Forgiveness and grace come only through the Gospel. The word "Gospel" means "good news." And we use this special word to refer to the really good news that Jesus Christ earned our forgiveness when he suffered and died for our sin on the cross, and he rose again from the dead, demonstrating that he had defeated sin, death, and the devil. That news is so good that it really deserves the term "Gospel" all for itself. Even if there are other things where we might say, "Well, that's good news," the Gospel, with a capital "G" is so good, that there's a value in reserving the title for the best news of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection for our salvation. But that, of course, does not mean the Law is bad. The Law is God's Word, and everything God speaks is good. So, while we may sometimes have an adversarial relationship to the Law, the Law is good for us, and we should learn to delight in it.

Our natural response to the Ten Commandments is not one of appreciation. And by "natural," I don't mean "natural" in the way God created us, but "natural" to our fallen and sinful nature, which is really unnatural, though to us it seems natural. And so our response to the Ten Commandments is not one of appreciation. We do not like restrictions. We do not like someone else telling us what we should or should not do. We want to make those decisions. So the Law feels restrictive, and sin feels like freedom. But this is merely an illusion. Sin always leads us into further bondage.

It would be kind of like if you're on the interstate, and you've had a bad day at work, or something just didn't go your way. Maybe you're sick of other people telling you what to do. You feel restricted, so you just want to take it up to a hundred. Now, what's that going to feel like? It might feel like freedom. *Nobody's going to tell me how fast I can drive!* It will feel like freedom until the trooper clocks you ... or worse. Suddenly your apparent freedom turns into bondage.

Or, I remember when I was a child, I always wanted my own room. I wanted the freedom to play with whatever I wanted to, and, most of all, I wanted to stay up as late as I wanted to. Finally, when I was in fourth grade, I got my wish. I got my own room. And I figured my parents wouldn't check and see if I actually went to sleep. So, as long as I was quiet, I could do whatever I wanted for as long as I wanted. On day one, it felt like freedom. On day two, it felt like bondage to being really, really tired.

That's the way sin is. It has the illusion of freedom. It feels like we're making our own rules and charting our own course. But there really is no such thing as absolute freedom, or what we

would call “autonomy.” “Autonomy” means to be a law unto oneself. But there is no such thing. That’s because the Law is hardwired into creation. The universe functions in a certain way, and we can’t bypass it. So if we throw off the Law and claim autonomy for ourselves, we will only end up in bondage to the consequences, and that is not freedom.

There is more freedom in obedience to God’s Law than there is in defiance of it. When we live in obedience to God’s Law, we find all these good things within his will that are open to us. It’s when we start chasing after things that are closed to us that we end up in bondage.

So when we look at God’s commandments, we want to consider why he gave us these commandments and why they are good for us. God is never bad to us. He does not withhold good things from us, but he wants to give us all good things. So when we look at the commandments, I want us to notice two things about each commandment. First, I want us to observe, *What sin does this commandment prohibit?* That’s usually the easy part. The second part takes a little bit of thought. We should go on to ask, *What good gift does this commandment protect?*

For example, consider the First Commandment. And this will be a little bit of review from last year. The First Commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” This obviously prohibits the worship of false gods. But what good gift does the commandment protect? It protects God’s gift of himself to us. This is the closest thing to the Gospel in the Ten Commandments. God has given himself to us. He has claimed us as his own, and he has made himself to be our God. This relationship is protected by the First Commandment. It protects God’s place as God in our lives. The commandment protects the gift. And we can apply this diagnostic to all the commandments.

Tonight we’re considering the Fifth Commandment: “You shall not kill.” Or, more literally, “You shall not murder.” And there’s a slight but meaningful difference; murder is the unauthorized taking of a human life.

Now what does this commandment prohibit? This is pretty easy, at least at first. It prohibits murder. It commands us to not kill one another without proper authorization. But there’s a bit more to it than just not killing. It certainly does not mean that you can beat someone within an inch of their life, so long as you don’t finish them off.

Each of the Ten Commandments are a shorthand for the broader content of God’s Law. That is, there are several other commandments, found elsewhere in Scripture, that are related to the Fifth Commandment and fit into the same category. So Luther brings those in when he says, “We should fear and love God so that we do our neighbor no bodily harm nor cause him any suffering.” And Jesus dials it up to the max when he says, “**You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and everyone who murders will be liable to judgment’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire**” (6:21-22). That’s a standard of the Law which condemns us all to hell in a flick of the tongue.

So when we look at people around us, we have no right to look upon them with superiority. Even when we hear about some vicious murderer on the news, Jesus reminds us that the same hatred lives in each of us. We are all guilty.

Now this principle has sometimes been misapplied in a way that it’s actually used to get us all off the hook. We say, “Well, everyone’s a sinner, so I’m not really any worse than anyone else.” And we kind of use that to excuse ourselves. But the truth that everyone is a sinner doesn’t

get any of us off the hook. It puts us all on the hook. It doesn't bring literal murderers up to the level of non-literal murderers. It exposes that all of us are already on the same level as literal murderers. The same hatred dwells in all of us. It exposes that every person, given the right circumstances, could be a murderer. You might be skeptical of that, but it's true. All it takes to be a murderer is to care about yourself more than someone else. Then you find yourself in a circumstance where you say, "It's either him or me," and you have to make a choice. All it takes is for you to value your own life over someone else's.

That might make us wonder about cases of self-defense or police and military force. Regarding self-defense, all I can really say is that those cases are sticky. We can't really say for certain without knowing the specific details, and every situation is a little bit different. The law of the land may excuse you, but that does not mean you're innocent before God. If you're defending someone else's life, we have a bit more clarity. In those cases, you're not deciding between your life and another person's life, but you may be deciding between a guilty person and an innocent victim. So also, police officers and soldiers, if they are acting in subjection to their authorities, and if they believe what they are doing is necessary and good, are not guilty of murder. If they know their orders are unjust, then they're guilty. Otherwise, they are simply doing what they have been commanded. The superior who ordered them to fight may be guilty of thousands or millions of murders, but the one acting in subjection to authority is not guilty of murder. But I will say too, regarding all of these circumstances, if you use more force than is necessary, or even if your actions are right, but you do it with hatred in your heart, it is murder, maybe not in the eyes of the government, but in the eyes of God it is.

So that's murder in a nutshell. It is the unauthorized taking of a human life.

The big question is, "Why? Why is murder wrong?" And you might say, "Well, it's a human being." Okay. But what's so special about human beings? Why can you kill an animal and eat it? Why can you kill a raccoon for digging through your garbage, but not a human being? Why is a human life more valuable? This might seem like a trivial question, like we don't really have to know why human life is valuable, as long as we know that it is. But I would caution you that not knowing the answer to this question is really, really dangerous, because if we don't know the answer, we will revert back to something else.

So what makes human life valuable? When I ask this question, I'm already assuming a few things. First, I'm assuming that human life is valuable, and that you already agree with me that human life is valuable. This, I think, is a fairly safe assumption. Almost everyone in our society accepts the proposition that human life is valuable. I'm also assuming—and this might be a little bit riskier—I'm assuming that you also believe that every human life is *equally* valuable. And I think most people in our society still agree with that statement, at least in theory.

But why? This has not always been the prevailing view of the world. So why would most people in our society agree that every human life is equal? The answer is the influence of Christianity. Aside from Judaism, which shares a similar moral foundation, I can't find another religion or philosophy in the world that can produce the conviction that every human life is equally valuable. Many religions and philosophies reject the notion of human equality. Or if they don't explicitly reject it, they don't have an argument for it.

For example, a naturalist philosophy, such as evolutionary theory, would lead us to believe that humans are not equal. If we are constantly evolving, then the more evolved persons are more valuable, and the less evolved don't deserve the same dignity.

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Many religions or worldviews are a form of tribalism. They prioritize their own group over another group. And this is simply human nature. It's a struggle for power. If we can put down others, we can step on their backs to get up. Or if we have the power, we need to keep others down or they'll rise up and take the power from us. It's human nature, and it's in the hearts of all of us. We don't come by equality naturally.

So why do we have, in our society, an assumption that all human life is equal in value? It comes from Christianity. Anywhere in the world, if you find a society that believes all humans are equal in value, you will find a society with a history of Christianity. And this does not mean that Christians have a perfect track record. We are also sinners. And we often say one thing, but live a different way. But the concept of human equality comes from Christian doctrine, and it has been embedded in our society, although I'm afraid it's only hanging on by a thread today. Nevertheless, at least for now, even among Americans who are not Christians, there's an assumption of human equality, even if they can't say why.

Christianity has a unique way of answering the question, "What makes human life valuable?" Here's the Christian answer: Mankind, both male and female, were created in the image of God. In Genesis 1(:27) we read, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The same principle is reiterated in chapter 9, even after the fall into sin. So this is where the value of human life comes from. You are valuable, not because of what you do, but because of who made you. And the person who made you is the same person who made the person next to you. And he's the same person who made the richest person in the world and the poorest person in the world, the biggest person in the world, and the smallest. Every human being is valuable, and equally valuable, because we were all created in the image of God. That's the basis for equality.

Now, you might already know this. So it might not seem like such a novel idea, until we realize that none of us actually live this way. You might accept this to be true, but you don't live by it. And I can preach this to you, but I don't live by it either. None of us do. We all live by a different standard of human value. And it's this: function. This is absolutely critical for us to understand about ourselves. We live as if a person's value depends on their function to us. God values human life on the basis of creation. And that's how he teaches us to value human life. But we value human life on the basis of function. And I hope you notice the difference. If the value of human life is based on creation, then all humans are equally valuable. No exceptions. But if the value of human life is based on function, then all human beings are not equally valuable. The strong become more valuable. The rich become more valuable. The attractive become more valuable. The intelligent become more valuable. The humorous become more valuable. Anyone who provides some sort of positive function becomes more valuable.

Now here's the really insidious part of it: if we treat people differently on the basis of their function, who's really the most valuable person in this system? Me. Every person around me has a different value, based on their function. That is, their worth depends on how they can benefit me. And that makes me the god of this system. This is straight from the devil, and it echoes the fall into sin, where the devil tempted Adam and Eve to become like God. That's the nature of sin, to treat ourselves as if we are gods. So the value of other humans ends up being the function they serve for us. And we all live this way.

Now, when we realize the principle behind the Fifth Commandment, that all human beings were created in the image of God, we see that this is the commandment that speaks to all the really hot issues in our culture today. And we need to mention these, but I will try my best to be

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as clear and concise as possible, which means I might not say everything you think should be said.

This is obviously the commandment that speaks most clearly to the life issues of abortion and euthanasia. Abortion is the big human rights tragedy of our day, and it's not even close. In the last couple of generations, over fifty million innocent children have been killed in our nation alone. The United States has been a world leader in this atrocity, but there are still hundreds of millions more around the world.

So what? I've heard it said that one death is a tragedy, ten is a massacre, and a million is a statistic. At some point, our consciences just don't have the capacity to compute this. So I'll translate it into a statistic that might resonate. Fifty million persons is thirteen percent of what the U.S. population would be. So for every seven people you have known in your life, there is one that you have not. That's the scope of abortion in the United States. And it absolutely has to stop. And I will never apologize for saying so.

Someone famously said that the question of when life begins is a religious question, and different religions have answered that question differently. That is absolutely false. It's not a religious question. It's a scientific question. However you answer the question of human dignity doesn't change this fact: life begins at conception. Even pro-choice biologists agree with that.

The religious or moral component is this: "How do we value human life?" If it depends on function, then you can make a case for abortion, euthanasia, or—consider this—just about anything else. Take a moment sometime to think about what those other things are. They've shown up in history before, and, if we value human beings according to their function, they will likely occur again. Every human life must be protected, because every human being is created in the image of God.

Now I've been thinking lately about where the blame really is in this atrocity. We might look at the mothers. Or I'm pretty sure the mothers think everyone else is looking at them. And they are guilty. There's nothing that can or should be said to take anyone off the hook. But we can also recognize that the mothers hold a unique place as both sinners and victims in this tragedy. And I've noticed in a few places in the gospels that Jesus has harsher condemnation for those who cause another person to sin. For example, he says, "**Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven**" (Matt. 5:19). In the economy of abortion, it's the mothers who most often want to keep the child, so we can and should have compassion for them. But they often face pressures from others in their life, perhaps the father of the child, either by actively pressuring her, or by simply being absent. It may also come from her parents, her friends, or even her employer. Great culpability also lies on the practitioners of abortion, as well as the politicians and activists who push it, especially the ones who know better. I once heard one of them say, "The government should never interfere with a woman's right to abort her child." Did you notice where he slipped up? He used the word "child." That's a word you don't usually hear them say. They don't want to acknowledge that reality. But when this person used the word "child," it revealed that he knows what it is, and that's disturbing.

The Fifth Commandment is also the one that speaks most clearly to transgenderism, because transgenderism is built on the idea that we have the autonomy to declare our own identity. But if we were created in the image of God, and if he created us male and female, then we really don't have that autonomy. And it's not even a matter of saying we're not allowed to declare our own identity, but that it is literally impossible. I can say whatever I want, but that doesn't change reality. Male and female are written on every cell of a person's body in the twenty-third

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chromosome. And so we should recognize that affirming a person's perceived gender does not actually help them. It only increases confusion, because it increases the distance between perception and reality. So-called "gender affirming" medical treatment, is anything but. It is absolutely cruel and diabolical, because it harms the body that was created in God's image. We need to help people who are suffering from this. And people who are suffering should not feel attacked. So we need to find a way to oppose the teaching of transgenderism, and we need to speak against the evil and false so-called "medical practices," in a way that helps people who are suffering. And the key is this: affirming that your body is good. God created you in his image. He made your body, and he made it good. You are valuable. As a whole person of body and soul, you are valuable, because you are created in the image of God. That's how the Fifth Commandment speaks to this.

It's also the commandment that speaks to racism. For one thing, if every human being is created after the image of God, then there can be no distinctions in value between one person and another or between one race and another. And, beyond that, it actually destroys the entire concept of race. There really is no such thing. We are all descended from common ancestors, first from Adam and Eve, but then again also from Noah. Physical distinctions, which we have sometimes perceived as being characteristics of race, are simply various characteristics of humanity. We are not from different races. We are all from the same flesh and blood. And that is flesh and blood that is created after the image of God. No one has more or less of it than anyone else. Therefore, no one has more or less value than another person. Every human being is equally valuable in the eyes of God, and his eyes are the ones that count.

Now, all of this should condemn us. It might even condemn us in very specific ways. But we're not looking to spread condemnation for the sake of condemnation. Instead, the Law already condemns us. Whether we understand the Law or not, we are condemned. Whether we feel condemned or not, the Law condemns us. And that's not because God's intention with the Law is to condemn us. God's intention is that the Law would govern an orderly universe in which righteousness dwells, and that is purely good. But the Law condemns us because we are wrong. We are not the way we are supposed to be. And so the Law, which is perfectly good in itself, has this negative function upon us. It condemns us ... all of us. We have not treated other people as if they are created in the image of God. We might look at other people and think, *Well, at least I didn't do what they did.* But we probably don't know what we would have done in their circumstances, or what we would have done in some other circumstances. We have the same self-centeredness and hatred in our hearts.

But where we are blind to the created image of God, God is not. And this is where we find hope. God still sees his own image in you, corrupted as it may be, and he desires to restore that image to perfection. So where we have failed to see the image of God in others, and we have treated them as less than human, Jesus sees the image of God, and he actually goes the other way with it. Instead of considering us less important than himself, he actually considers us more important than himself. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). It's not a matter of him thinking that we're good enough to save. And it's not a matter of him thinking that some people have enough good left in them that they deserve saving. It's a matter of him seeing that we are all corrupt. We all have this disease where we make ourselves out to be our own gods. But because of his great compassion and our great need, he offered himself in our place. This is what the cross was for. If you ever think your sin is too great, remember the actual punishment Jesus paid. It was not a small price, because he was not simply paying for small

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crimes. He was paying for big crimes, so he paid the ultimate price. He did this, not because we deserve it, but because we need it. He still cares about that image that he created in us, and he desires to redeem and restore it.

So when this or another commandment condemns you, confess it. Confess it to God. If it troubles your conscience, confess it before your pastor or another Christian. And believe the promise of God, which is sealed with the blood of Jesus, that he forgives you for the sake of Jesus' blood. It's not because of what you have done. It's only because of what Jesus has done for you. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.