

In the Beginning

Race and the Imago Dei (Genesis 1:27; Acts 1:26)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 16, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ As you're probably well aware, tomorrow is a national holiday to observe the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. His actual birthday is January 15th, but we mark off the third Monday of January every year as MLK Day. Now in church, we talk a lot about Martin Luther, the 16th-century Protestant Reformer. So I don't want to confuse you. Today I'm talking about the 20th-century Baptist preacher and civil rights leader. The Martin who was instrumental in the civil rights movement to end legally-sanctioned segregation in our society.
 - Now this morning's sermon is not focused on MLK himself. **But we are using the occasion of MLK Day to do some extended reflection on the convictions central to MLK's resounding message.** His most notable speech, of course, was his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington in August of 1963. There are so many memorable lines. One that sticks out for many would be the following: *"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 message resonates in all of us. It's a beautiful dream that, I'm sure, all of us want to see come true. And we should recognize that, by the grace of God, that dream is coming true. **In the last 60 years, our society has dramatically changed.** Not only have laws changed, but hearts and minds have changed too. Back in the 60s, we had presidential and gubernatorial candidates openly running on platforms that supported segregation. Thank God that that would be unthinkable in our day. Public opinion has progressed and the vast majority of people in our nation would wholeheartedly support Dr. King's dream.
 - **But that's not to suggest that the problem is solved.** That racism – whether in individual hearts or in larger societal systems – is a thing of the past. No, that dream that Dr. King so winsomely described is still in process of being fulfilled. Each of us has a part to play – a responsibility to work towards a more just and equitable society.

- ❖ **Now sadly, in the last five years, we've seen racial divides fracture our nation, our churches, and even families.** The situation has been exasperated by a number of high-profile police shootings and killings of unarmed black people; by xenophobic hate speech and violence committed against Asian Americans, which drastically increased during the pandemic (especially among the elderly); and by the unveiled animosity in the speech of political leaders towards immigrants and refugees, especially coming from Latin America.
 - **So being black, yellow, or brown is still consequential to how we are perceived and treated in a society that is predominately white.** The color of your skin still makes a difference. We can acknowledge that – while still being grateful to God for how far we've come since the 1960s. We can (and should) recognize both.

- ❖ Now since we're going through Genesis 1-11 in our current series – and since we just explored the idea of being made in the image of God in last Sunday's message – this morning I want to highlight the theological underpinning for that dream that Dr. King has inspired so many of us to pursue.

- ❖ **I wonder how many people realize that that particular vision for society was founded on the theological conviction that every single human being – white, black, yellow, or brown – is made in the image of God.** Do people realize that Dr. King was making theological arguments? Which means, without the *imago dei*, this is just a pipe dream. There's no foundation. Nothing solid to build on.
 - It's no coincidence that a Baptist preacher was the one who had these dreams, and made these arguments, and cast this beautiful vision of ethnic harmony. Now I realize Dr. King came from a theological tradition that would be described as liberal. **I'd probably disagree with him on some key points of Christian doctrine. But not on this one – not on the doctrine of creation.** That mankind was made in the image of God. And every single one of us – regardless of skin tone, hair texture, body type, facial features – it doesn't matter, we all bear the image of God.
- ❖ So this morning, I want to flesh out this idea that every person you'll ever meet is a divine image bearer and to apply that conviction to the issues of race and racism. To do that, I want to start by making three observations from Scripture. And then based on those observations about the image of God, I'll try to draw out three implications.

All Human Beings Share the Image of God

- ❖ Let's start with our first observation: **All human beings share the image of God.** We touched on this last week when we covered Genesis 1:26-27. Let me read it again, “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.*”
 - **Now over the weeks and months to come, we're actually going to keep coming back to these verses because they are so foundational to so many doctrines that we hold as Christians.** Our view on the sanctity of life, on the sanctity of marriage, on the givenness of gender – all these issues are rooted in Genesis 1:26-27. And the same goes for race and racism.
- ❖ Now when we did an overview of Genesis 1, we saw how, on the sixth day of creation, God made all the land animals. “*The livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth.*” (1:24) And then on the same day, he made us. **We didn't get our own day of creation.** We shared it with cows and caterpillars and cocker-spaniels. That's to emphasize our commonality.
 - **That's why we're not surprised when zoologists or geneticists point out the similarities between humans and other mammals.** Whether in our physical structure or genetic makeup, we bear a strong resemblance, especially to primates. And chemists will remind us that all living organisms are made up of the same molecules, mainly carbon. We accept that. That's what you expect reading Genesis 1. **But the one difference – the key difference – between humans and all other living organisms is the *imago dei*, the image of God.**

- ❖ **In some sense we resemble God in ways that all other creatures do not.** It's only in regards to mankind do we read these words in v26, “*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.*” That same language pops up later in **Genesis 5:3** where it says Adam “*fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.*” So as a son resembles his father, you could say that we, human beings, resemble God the Father.
 - But in what sense is this so? **Historically, some have tried to argue that it means we share a physical resemblance.** Just as I'm sure Seth shared a physical resemblance to his father Adam. But that would be a mistake – a misreading of the anthropomorphic way in which God is depicted in Scripture. When you read about God's face or eyes or arms – these are merely anthropomorphic descriptions. It's not suggesting that God has a face or eyes or arms like we do. Because of our creaturely limitations, we're only able to describe God using human categories. We know they're inadequate, but it's all we have to work with.

- ❖ So we can rule out the idea that being made in God's image implies some sort of physical resemblance. **But we can affirm that being made in his image could refer to the ways in which we share many attributes and characteristics with our Creator.** That would include our intelligence, our virtues, our sense of morality – which you won't find anywhere else in the animal kingdom.
 - **Being made in God's image could also refer to how humans were made as spiritual beings with the capacity to consciously relate to God and to glorify him as our Creator.** All other creatures on earth glorify him, but only humans glorify God consciously (along with the host of heaven).
 - **Or being made in his image could refer to our responsibility to rule on earth on God's behalf as his vice-regents.** Contextually, this makes the most sense because right after God says, “*Let us make man in our image,*” he gives us dominion to rule over the rest of creation.

- ❖ **However we understand what it means to be made in God's image, the main point for us to consider is that this applies to every single human being.** Everyone begotten of a human father and mother is a human being. And no matter your size, your mental capacity, your physical ability, your skin color, hair texture, facial appearance – **every human being is an image bearer of God.**

- ❖ **Even the Fall of Man did not erase the image of God from us.** That image is marred. That reflection is blurred. And because of human sinfulness, we're like bent mirrors turned in on ourselves – falling short of our purpose to reflect the image of God.
 - But even still, we still bear his image. Consider Psalm 8. Even after the Fall, King David affirms that mankind is still set apart from the rest of creation and still has dominion over the works of God's hands. We never lose the image of God. **So that means no human being – no matter how fallen, how sinful, how evil – has lost or can lose the *imago dei*.**

All Human Beings Share a Common Ancestry

- ❖ So our first observation is that all human beings share the image of God and no one can lose the image of God. **The second observation is that all human beings share a common ancestry.** That's what we see in the Genesis creation account, especially when it zooms in on Day 6 in chapter 2 and the creation of the first couple, Adam and Eve. **And from this pair, everyone on earth and everyone throughout human history can all trace our lineage.**
 - Now someone might argue that I'm overlooking the highly poetic and figurative nature of this text and mistakenly assuming that it intends to teach that everyone comes from Adam and Eve. I still think Genesis 1-2 does teach that, but for the sake of argument, let's just go to the NT – to a text that's clearly not poetic or figurative.
 - Listen to **Acts 17:26**. Here the Apostle Paul is preaching to Athenians in the Areopagus. He's describing God as the one true God who made the world and everything in it. *“And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.”* The one man is referring, of course, to Adam.

- ❖ Authors of the OT and NT affirm our common ancestry in Adam. Now why am I stressing this observation? Think about it. **Unless every human being is a biological descendent of the first human pair created in the image of God – then there is room for someone to argue that some people groups today may possibly descend from another lineage and thus are not image bearers of God.** Or at least they're not full image bearers like “us”. And the “us” would refer to whichever dominant ethnic group is making the argument.
 - Friends, I'm not just speculating that someone might make this kind of twisted argument. Historically, people have argued this way to justify the mistreatment, enslavement, or genocide of marginalized and oppressed minority groups.

- ❖ **This is why it's so important to affirm Adam and Eve as historical figures who really did exist.** Who are not mythological characters in a story. It really matters that everyone in human history can trace our lineage back to this first pair. It's this common ancestry in Adam and Eve that supports the prior observation that all human beings share the image of God.
 - So this isn't just a theological issue. It's an ethical issue. **The biblical creation account is so important for undercutting all arguments of racial superiority.** In fact, it goes even further and challenges the legitimacy of the modern classification of people into different “races”. It's common parlance for us to speak of different races of people. When you fill out a census form, it'll ask you to identify your race. You're given the option of White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, etc. **But biblically, there is only one race – the human race.** In the creation account, we just have people made in the image of God. Distinguished, not from one another, but from all of creatures on earth.

All Human Beings Have an Ethnic Identity

- ❖ But this leads to our last observation. While the Genesis account does not classify human beings along modern racial categories, it does distinguish us according to ethnicity. **The third observation is that all human beings have an ethnic identity.** In other words, we should be using the category of ethnicity instead of race.

- ❖ **Race is an unhelpful category because it relies on differences in physical traits to classify and group people.** Traditionally, the focus was on skin tone, hair texture, facial features, or other physical traits. But that approach is too simplistic and too generalized.
 - For example, I would argue that the term “Asian” as a category of race is deficient. Sure, on a superficial level, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Filipinos share many similar physical traits. Lumping us altogether and calling us Asians is convenient. But in so doing, you gloss over the rich heritage and cultural distinctiveness of each people group. **Just because you have a room full of people who look the same doesn’t mean you’re dealing with a homogenous group.**

- ❖ **A more descriptive and helpful category – and frankly a more biblical one – would be ethnicity.** Because ethnicity focuses on the cultural aspects of group identity rather than physical traits. In fact, people in the same ethnic group (or what missiologists call people groups) could even manifest different physical traits, but what they share in common are thick unifiers like language, dress, food, customs, values, and even religion.
 - If we return to Genesis, we see the first mention of distinct ethnic groups starting in Genesis 10. After the flood account, the text walks through the genealogy of Noah and his three sons. It ends in v32 with *“These are the clans of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations, and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood.”*

- ❖ In the ancient Greek translation of the OT, the word for nations is *ethnos*. It’s where we get the word ethnicity. **What we see in the Genesis account is that ethnicity is part of God’s sovereign plan.** As we read earlier in Acts 17:26, *“he made from one man every nation (ethnos) of mankind.”* His plan was to fill the earth with a multitude of people who are grouped together in a multitude of *ethnos* (ethnic people groups).
 - In Genesis 1:28, God commands man to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And then in Genesis 9:1, he reiterates that command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And that’s what we see happening in Genesis 10. We see that command being fulfilled as the human race begins to spread abroad the earth, diversifying into many different nations (or ethnicities). So ethnicity is part of God’s plan.

- ❖ But at the same time, we can’t ignore Genesis 11 and the story of the Tower of Babel. **Because there we learn that the birth of languages and the scattering of all *ethnos* throughout the earth was rooted in human sin and rebellion.** It was the LORD’s response to the human race’s refusal to scatter and fill the earth on their own.
 - But even so, that doesn’t mean the only natural conclusion is that the existence of all the different ethnicities in the world is a bad thing and not part of God’s good creation order. **We only have to look to the end of the biblical story when God renews all of Creation.** When Christ returns in the end, we’re told in Scripture that whatever was a consequence of the Fall – whatever was unintended in God’s very good creation – will be reversed and gone. And whatever remains in the New Heavens and New Earth must therefore be very good.

- ❖ In **Revelation 7:9**, we're told that one thing that remains are the *ethnos* (nations). “*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.*”
 - **So apparently our ethnic distinctions will carry on into eternity.** God won't erase our ethnic identities or reverse the human race back to speaking only one language. Which means our different languages and our different ethnicities are part of God's very good, sovereign design for this world.
- ❖ Friends, here's the bottom line. **Just as God made us with a gender, God made us with an ethnicity.** I have an ethnic identity. You have an ethnic identity. Ours might be the same or they might be different. Either way, since they're part of God's design, our ethnic identities should be cherished as good gifts and should never become a source of either pride or shame.

Implications of the *Imago Dei*

- ❖ Those are our observations: We all share the image of God; we all share a common ancestry; we all have an ethnic identity. Let's consider three implications of the *imago dei*. **(1) Racism will flourish in environments where the image of God is overlooked or undervalued.**
 - Now I'm not suggesting that racism can only be resisted by those who hold a biblical worldview. That without a belief in the *imago dei* you'll end up a racist. We should be grateful for common grace, which explains how those who reject the Genesis account can still believe in human rights and the dignity of all irrespective of ethnicity.
 - But what I am suggesting is that without Genesis 1-2 – without the conviction that every person you'll ever meet is a divine image bearer – then we lack a firm foundation to keep up the fight. To continually resist racism.
- ❖ **If we don't have the image of God, then on what basis do we ground our conviction that no ethnic groups are superior or inferior to others?** If humanity does not possess an inherent value – attributable to our Creator – then the most we possess would be functional value. A value rooted in what you can contribute to the world at large. **But if all we have is functional value, then why wouldn't more advanced peoples with intellectual, scientific, and technological superiority be consider superior over other peoples?**
 - Now it's only fair to acknowledge that historically Christian nations – steeped in a biblical worldview – have still been racist and imperialistic. But not because of their believe in the *imago dei* but in spite of it. They either overlooked or undervalued this doctrine that's so foundational to Christian faith and ethics.
- ❖ So practically what this means is that resisting racism starts with good theology. There's a lot of pressure to just do something. To do the right thing. **But doing the right things will only be sustained in the long haul by believing the right things about the *imago dei*.** So we're not neglecting our duty or avoiding the problem by all this preaching and teaching. Just as weeds will flourish in your garden if you don't give proper attention to the soil, racism will continue to flourish if we don't tend to our theological foundations. That's why it's important to help each other develop a robust doctrine of man and the *imago dei*.

- ❖ **(2) Ethnicity is a key component of your identity but it must not be primary.** Again, let me stress that your ethnicity is a part of God’s good design for you. It’s part of your identity – a crucial part. **But because of the *imago dei*, you can take any person in the world, and you will share far more in common compared to any perceived differences between you.**
 - You might be of different ethnicities. You might have different skin tones. You might have different cultural customs and tastes. You might speak different languages. But you share the image of God, which outweighs all the differences.

- ❖ This is especially the case if that person is a Christian like you. That means you share an even stronger bond. You both are *in Christ*. By the grace of God – through faith in his Son living, dying, and rising again for you and your salvation – the two of you share, not just the image of God, but the image of Christ. **You are both human beings and new creations in Christ.** There is nothing more primary to your identity than being a new creation in Christ.
 - That’s why I try to avoid communicating that either my ethnicity, my nationality, or my gender is primary to my identity. They’re key components – just not primary. So I’m *not* a Chinese American man who happens to be a Christian. I am a Christian who happens to be a Chinese American man. My identity in Christ is primary.

- ❖ But that in no way implies that being a Christian is the only component of my identity that really matters. **It doesn’t mean we should only focus on our shared faith and attempt to be colorblind in how we relate to one another.**
 - Only those in the majority ethnicity have the luxury of living a colorblind life. **As an ethnic minority, I am very much aware, on a daily basis, that I am an ethnic minority in my neighborhood, my city, my country.** So it’s not helpful to be told by well-meaning people that they don’t even think of me as Chinese. That I’m so similar to them that they often forget I’m Chinese.
 - But I don’t want them to ignore my Chinese-ness. That’s a part of who I am. It’s how God made me. I value my ethnicity. I seek to honor my culture and ethnic heritage. Which is why I want others to see my ethnicity and to learn to appreciate my culture as they do their own.

- ❖ **Honestly, the only place where I can forget that I’m Chinese is here in our church where I’m part of the ethnic majority.** Which ought to make me all the more sensitive to those who worship with us and happen to be of another ethnicity. Since the majority of my week is spent navigating life as an ethnic minority, I’m that much better prepared to come to church – to now be in the majority – and to be quick to empathize with the experience of those who are in the minority in this church.
 - **I should be far more sensitive to their feelings of alienation and far more willing to lay aside my comforts to help them assimilate into the community.** Because that’s how I want to be treated when I’m in spaces where I’m the minority. So this should be the mindset that those of us who are Chinese ought to bring to the Chinese heritage church. Not prioritizing our privilege but rather our responsibility to do unto others as you would have them do to you (Mt 7:12).

- ❖ This leads us to our last implication. **(3) Ethnic diversity is good; ethnic harmony is better.** Multi-ethnicity is something a lot of churches have been pursuing. And there's a lot to be commended. If the motivation is to glorify God and his gospel by demonstrating how our unity in Christ is stronger than all natural bonds of affinity – then that's a worthy pursuit.
 - **But I find it troubling when churches and organizations get so focused on numbers and percentages.** Trying so hard to get strong representation from all the major ethnic groups in the area. But if the goal is just to collect all the colors of the rainbow in one room, then I'd say it's too low of a goal.

- ❖ **Multi-ethnicity for its own sake is not the point.** I mean even hell will be a multi-ethnic community. We shouldn't set the bar at ethnic diversity. We should be aiming for ethnic harmony. **Hell is ethnically diverse, but there is no harmony.**
 - But if ethnic harmony is the goal for our church, then it makes us desperate for the gospel and utterly dependent on the Spirit to bind us together in the bond of peace. If ethnic diversity is all we're shooting for, then we'll have to wait until the ratios change and the percentages increase. Who knows how long that'll take. **But if we aim for ethnic harmony, then that can be experienced now as we move in love and kindness towards anyone in our congregation of a different ethnicity than you.**

- ❖ So I encourage you to start the year off with a goal. **A goal to experience the sweetness of ethnic harmony in your life and in your relationships this year.** That might mean reaching out to befriend a fellow church member who is a member of a different ethnic group. Sit down with them and simply hear their story. Experience their culture; taste their food; learn their language. And best of all, praise God together and pray together even if you're speaking in different tongues.
 - Ethnic diversity focuses on the quantity of numbers and percentages. Ethnic harmony focuses on the quality of friendships and relationships. That's why ethnic diversity is good but ethnic harmony is better.