

The Image Question

GENESIS 1:26-27 (NRSV) Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,

in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

JOHN 14:8-9 (NRSV) *Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."* ⁹ *Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"*

Not long ago, a monogram—worn as a pendant or printed on a T-Shirt or a key chain—became relatively popular among younger generations and some who wanted to project a "spiritual" image. The monogram was the letters, "WWJD?"

Now, I'm in no position to judge, nor would I choose to judge the sincerity or depth of commitment behind that desire to project a "spiritual" image. Nor do I wish to engage in a sociological analysis of the general public's response (the fact is: there wasn't much public response. The trinket was a passing fad shared within a relatively small homogeneous population.

Regardless of the image intended or perceived, I'm not sure how many people know the origin of the letters "WWJD?" or the question: "What Would Jesus Do?"

It emerged in a different century—in Charles Sheldon's 1896 best-selling novel, *In His Steps*. As the novel opens, Reverend Henry Maxwell is struggling to finish his sermon for Sunday. He's had trouble focusing because members of his congregation routinely interrupt to ask for help. A homeless man, Jack Manning, has been wandering around town asking for work, but no one, including Maxwell, helps him or takes the time to hear his story.

During the worship service on Sunday, Jack confronts the congregation's lack of compassion for the homeless by standing up in the middle of the sermon and saying they're not living like Christ. He faints, and a few days later, dies.

Maxwell is extremely moved by Jack's death and starts questioning whether he acted appropriately to Jack. The next Sunday, he challenges his congregation, for an entire year, never to act before asking, "What would Jesus do?"

For the rest of the novel, Sheldon describes characters around town as they try to live up to the challenge, and in the process are radically transformed.

In a real sense, the question, "What would Jesus do?" captures the intent of this series of sermons titled, "Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus."

The inspiration and topics of the series are from Jim Wallis' book of the same title. Wallis identifies eight questions—eight teachings of Jesus—that serve as a standard by which we can discern whether we truly are "Reclaiming Jesus." Today's question is "The Image Question."

There was a camera commercial on TV some years ago in which a famed tennis pro stepped out of a white Lamborghini, lowered his sunglasses, and uttered the words, "Image is everything." The Scripture Dean read earlier makes a similar statement, but with much more profound implications: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

What does it mean to be created in the "image of God?" What are the implications and responsibilities of accepting our role as "image-bearers?" The New Testament reading gives us the answer: "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*" John's gospel begins with the words, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" That Word, says John, became flesh, and lived among us. In the opening verses of the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul writes, "*He is the image of the invisible God...*" (1:15)—the image—the same image in which all humanity is created.

The Image Question is a question of identity: who are we? Each of us has a unique set of genes and chromosomes that, unless there is some trauma or dysfunction, determine our physical, mental, and emotional identities. Identifying and accepting those characteristics is an important factor in the quality of life we live. A fish can't decide to live in a tree; a robin can't live under water; I will never be a professional athlete. A part of who we are is set at conception.

But at another level, a significant factor in our self-identity involves our responses to our environment: our family, our peers, our culture at large; and, although we don't always respond with conscious awareness based upon clear values and confirmed information, we do have that ability. That ability to make informed decisions is a part of the image of God created within us.

I submit that many human problems occur because we do not become fully who we are created to be. But if we have difficulty determining who we are created to be, look to Jesus, the visible image of the invisible God in whose image we all are created. An impossible standard? Of course it is, as long as we apply the whole image to each individual. But look again at the Genesis text:

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind [adam] in our image, according to our likeness; and let *them* [plural] have dominion [i.e., stewardship] over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

NOTE: humankind is given stewardship over every part of creation—every part except—each other. Therefore, when any people decide to have *dominion over* any other people, instead of exercising *stewardship with* all other people over all of creation, it is an act against God's intention and purpose in creation—an overturning of God's original purposes in creation—from the beginning.

And at this point I connect with the ideas from Jim Wallis' book: going back

to the beginning in John and Genesis is the theological foundation for how Jesus teaches us to treat all human beings, since we all are children and creations of God—created in God's own image and likeness. John anchors Christ in the very creation of the world and then identifies him as the "life" and "light" of "all peoples."

In other words, the foundation of all human rights, equality, and dignity is that all of us are created in the image of God. This is the radical paradigm God re-introduced through Jesus, and today we still experience the shock waves from this way of viewing others. No matter their race or ethnicity, gender, who they are, how they worship, or who they love, seeing all people as full image-bearers of God undermines any human attempt to build barriers or divisions between groups. Such barriers and divisions are a brutal assault on the image of God.

And the offense is deeply theological, not just social, or political. These texts theologically challenge and biblically rebuke any claim to superiority by any human group over any another,¹ for all humanity bears the image of God.

Lutheran Pastor, Peter Marty, shares a story about some of the angels who were bothered that God planned to make human beings in God's own image. "How can something so precious and powerful be entrusted to this creature?" So they conspired to hide the image of God where no one would ever think to look for it.

One said, "Let's put it at the bottom of the sea where no one ever goes."

"No, let's put it atop the highest mountain that no one will ever scale," said another.

The ideas flowed, only to be rejected by the group. Then the shrewdest of the angels said: "Let us hide the divine image in the heart of every man and woman. That's the last place they'll look for it."

So the angels hid the precious divine image within the heart of human beings, where it has resided ever since.

A Fred Craddock quote: "God said, 'I'm proud of the squirrel, I love the elephant, the horse is good, the mule is nice, and I do like these llamas, but the one that is exactly like me is this one. I have breathed into this one my own life.'"

Squirrels, elephants, and llamas cannot plan, create, or contemplate. Horses and mules cannot marvel or feel awe or conceive a future. But human beings can.

Something else we can do: we can love, because God is love. It's reasonable to assume that where love is found lacking in the human heart, it's going to be difficult to locate the image of God hidden there—right where the angels put it. How do we know this? by reclaiming Jesus as the center of all we believe and all we do.

[Prayer slide]

¹ Wallis, Jim. Christ in Crisis (p. 46-47). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.