

Say It Again, and Again

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Genesis 1 (The Inclusive Bible, selected verses)

IN THE BEGINNING

God created the heavens and the earth.

2 But the earth became chaos and emptiness, and darkness came over the face of the Deep—yet the Spirit of God was brooding over the surface of the waters.

3 Then God said, “Light: Be!” and light was.

4 God saw that light was good, and God separated light from darkness.

5 God called the light “Day” and the darkness “Night.” Evening came, and morning followed—the first day.

6 Then God said, “Now, make an expanse between the waters! Separate water from water!” So it was: 7 God made the expanse and separated the water above the expanse from the water below it. 8 God called the expanse “Sky.” Evening came, and morning followed—the second day.

9 Then God said, “Waters under the sky: be gathered into one place! Dry ground: appear!” So it was. 10 God called the dry ground “Earth” and the gathering of the waters “Sea.” And God saw that this was good.

11 Then God said, “Earth: produce vegetation—plants that scatter their own seeds, and every kind of fruit tree that bears fruit with its own seed in it!” So it was...And God saw that this was good. 13 Evening came, and morning followed—the third day.

14 Then God said, “Now, let there be lights in the expanse of the sky! Separate day from night! Let them mark the signs and seasons, days and years, 15 and serve as luminaries in the sky, shedding light on the earth.” So it was...And God saw that this was good. 19 Evening came, and morning followed—the fourth day.

20 God then said, “Waters: swarm with an abundance of living beings! Birds: fly above the earth in the open expanse of the sky!” And so it was...God saw that this was good

22 and blessed them, saying, “Bear fruit, increase your numbers, and fill the waters of the seas! Birds, abound on the earth!” 23 Evening came, and morning followed—the fifth day.

24 Then God said, “Earth: bring forth all kinds of living soul—cattle, things that crawl, and wild animals of all kinds!” So it was: 25 God made all kinds of wild animals, and cattle, and everything that crawls on the ground, and God saw that this was good.

26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, to be like us. Let them be stewards of the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals, and everything that crawls on the ground.” 27 Humankind was created as God’s reflection: in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them. 28 God blessed them and said, “Bear fruit, increase your numbers, and fill the earth—and be responsible for it! Watch over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things on the earth!” ...So it was. 31 God looked at all of this creation, and proclaimed that this was good—very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.

Psalm 1, selected verses, from the Inclusive Bible

Steve

Happiness comes to those who reject the path of violence, who refuse to associate with criminals or even to sit with people who belittle others.

Happiness comes to those who delight in the Law of God and meditate on it day and night.

They’re like trees planted by flowing water—

They bear fruit in every season, and their leaves never wither: everything they do will prosper.

Soundtrack for the writing of this sermon: “Worthy” by India.Arie.

Prayer

Sermon

My pastoral coach said to me this week something I’ve heard before but maybe hadn’t fully integrated:

People need to receive a message seven times to really grasp it and incorporate it.

We were talking about announcements for book groups, but it turns out it is true for theological headlines, too.

So today is one of those days when I want to repeat a message you have already heard and speak to it in a few new ways - just to make sure.

You are beloved,
You are good,
And you are welcome.

Our community is built on the foundation of welcome and hospitality and we live into that practice because we see our neighbors as good, beloved, and reflecting the image of God.

We can offer welcome and hospitality because we know we have been welcomed, and we dare to say aloud, we are good, beloved, and made in the *imago Dei*.

This morning's text is more than a poetic rendering of the beauty of nature. As the Sunday School lesson for today teaches, "In the [very] first stories in the Bible, God creates and welcomes all living things, including humans. A relationship is established."¹ The Biblical narrative starts by proclaiming the beauty and the goodness of creation. And did you notice, just to make sure we get it, Genesis 1 says creation is good six times, and then, in speaking of human kind, Genesis 1 says God thinks we are *very good*. Huh. Seven times. The author of Genesis must have studied communication. And that idea must have been pretty important to them.

It's pretty important to a lot of people.

A pastor I often listen to says: "My faith began when I realized I was good. After a life time of feeling unworthy, [after hearing that message], hearing I was good changed my life."²

Now listen, I'm not saying a one of us is perfect. But you are good. As Desmond Tutu says, human beings are made for goodness³. As the songwriter India.Arie puts it, everyone of us is worthy.

¹ Growing Faith Resources, Welcoming All Unit, Session 1 Cafe Discussion Guide. This season we are using the same themes in worship and in Sunday School - this quote comes from our Sunday School Curriculum.

² Robb McCoy, Pulpit Fiction Narrative Cast for Sep 12, 2021

³ See Tutu's book, *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference*

In Genesis 1, “we are reminded that we belong here. We all do.”⁴

Children of God, hear it, we are good, we are beloved, we belong here, we are made in God’s image.

And what does it mean to bear God’s image?

I want to take a minute to talk about Genesis 1:27, as we read it this morning: “Humankind was created as God’s reflection: in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them.”

This is a particularly important verse to examine today, after Julia’s reminder to us of ways that we can welcome folks of all gender identities.

My understanding of this verse was shifted by the scholarship of Austen Hartke, author of *Transforming: The Bible and Transgender Christians*. He walks through the first chapter of Genesis, and arriving at verse 27 with this crucial point:

“I’ve...concluded that this verse does not discredit other sexes or genders, any more than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk, or the separation of land from sea rejects the existence of marshes and estuaries....Just as we call God the Alpha and Omega, implying all things from first to last and in between, the author of Genesis 1 is using a poetic device to corral the infinite diversity of creation into categories we can easily understand.”

So, the whole range of humanity is good, and beautiful. And, made in God’s image.

Hartke and theologian M Barclay take the concept of the image of God back to John Wesley: Wesley’s idea of the image of God was “relational capabilities...how we orient ourselves toward each other and creation.”⁵

We heard verses from Psalm 1 today, which points to this relationality. Happy are those who are in right relationship with God, creation, and each other, you might paraphrase it - our trees are rooted in fertile ground and bear fruit.

⁴ Growing Faith Resources, Welcoming All Unit

⁵ An excerpt of Hartke’s book was published in *Christian Century*. Austen Hartke, “God’s Unclassified World: Nonbinary Gender and the Beauty of Creation,” *Christian Century*: April 25, 2018. Contact Pastor Reebee for a copy of this article.

So, let's come back to goodness.

Human kind is made good, made for goodness, made in God's image, made in relationship, made to be in relationship with God and creation and each other.

Do you know that you are in this story of creation? You are right there, when it says

27 Humankind was created as God's reflection: in the divine image God created them; female and male - both, neither - God made them. 28 God blessed them and said, "Bear fruit, increase your numbers, and fill the earth—and be *responsible* for it! Watch over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things on the earth!" ...So it was. 31 God looked at all of this creation, and proclaimed that this was good—very good.

To be responsible for it - well, I've preached that sermon before - but key to it is relationship. Love. Goodness. Welcome. Care. Hospitality.

And when it comes to other human beings, let's not forget how important it is, to say it again and again and again:

You are loved.

You are good.

You are beloved.

You are welcome here.

God is our source.

God created all people GOOD.

God created all people GOOD.

God is love.

And God loves everybody.

Every one of us.

Every single one of us.

Close your eyes and hear this:

You, child of God,

Are very very good,

And God loves you.

And God first gave us this task:

To be stewards of God's good, beloved, beautiful creation, to be in right relation with creation.

In nature that means taking care, being stewards - dominion as it is often translated it is not domination but caretaking.

With our neighbors, that means loving as God loves God's good, beloved, beautiful children, all of them.

You, child of God,
Are very very good,
And God loves you.
And so do we.

Amen.