

Imago Dei: Created in the Image of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
Second Sunday in Lent, March 16, 2025, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

Tradition is wisdom collected.
Wisdom is experience gathered.
Experience is life encountered.

We are all scholars of our own story
and of other stories we learn through love.
When we share what we know,
what we value,
we spin a force of the Spirit
that reaches back to ancient campfires
and out to a tomorrow
we cannot yet imagine.

Some of you may recognize these words of Steven Charleston – bishop in the Episcopal Church and elder in the Choctaw nation – and on this Second Sunday of Lent they were the words that called to me as I considered not only my call to bring a word to this pulpit today – but the call to all of us to use our stories ... the Gospel story and our own stories ... to both claim our history and to live into our future as people created in the image of God and called to love one another as God loves us by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We are all scholars of our own story ... and this, scholars, is the story of *Imago Dei* ... Latin for “image of God” and the name of a doctrine as ancient as the first chapter of Genesis:

Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness."
So God created them in God's image, in the image of God they were created.

It is a doctrine that teaches us that since humans bear God's image, every person has inherent dignity and worth, regardless of class or race, gender or identity, ability or disability.

We are scholars of our own story ... including the story we tell in answer to the question “So, who IS this God in whose image we were created?”

And that brings me to another story ... one I’ve told before but one I believe bears retelling.

It was 2007 and then rector Ed Bacon invited me to join him for his annual retreat. It was an eight-day silent retreat with the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Haverford, Pennsylvania — and it is an experience I will always remember and have no plan to replicate.

It will not be a surprise to most of you that eight days of silence and I turned out not to be a match made in heaven and ... there were some wonderful things about the experience I still hold with gratitude and which continue to inform my journey.

One of them was the homily I heard from Father Sullivan — one of the Roman priests who came to preside in the convent chapel. He talked about his early days in ministry, doing missionary work in Guatemala and the deep friendship he developed with his Protestant roommate. He said they had MUCH in common as they worked among the poor of the city and they had lots of great conversations about theology, mission and ministry.

The one chasm they couldn't bridge, however, was the one between their different views on the nature of humanity.

His roommate, the priest recounted, was convinced humans are inherently evil beings who can only accomplish good through our baptism into the Body of Christ.

The priest, on the other hand, was convinced that humans are inherently good and that our membership in the Body of Christ enables, equips and empowers us to resist evil and to participate with God in making the world a better place.

And these two stories lead to very different world views -- because who we think we are turns out to have **a lot to do** with who we think God is: how we understand who we were created to be turns out to have a lot to do with how we understand who the Creator is.

Is God a punitive male authority figure with an anger management problem ready to cast us into outer darkness for coloring outside of the lines of any of the house rules?

Or is God a loving creator yearning to realize the dream of gathering all creation around the table like the mother bird gathers her babies in today's gospel to be fed by the holy food of love, justice and compassion?

And how we answer those questions for ourselves -- how we are scholars of that story -- turns out to influence not only how we live out our faith in the world, but how we put our faith into action through the values we embrace, and the change we work to see as we journey into Lent this year surrounded by the sound and fury of division and polarization which threaten to turn us all into bread of anxiety addicts as we watch our democracy being shredded one executive order at a time while the ever-rising tide of Christian Nationalism hijacks the Good News of God's inclusive love and deploys it as a weapon of mass discrimination aimed at anyone different than they are with a frightening new twist of toxic theology being called ... wait for it ... **The Sin of Empathy.**

Seriously. I couldn't make this up.

The demonization of empathy is definitely a thing – and an example of it being a thing on the rise can be found in the rhetoric from Christian Nationalists in their response to Bishop Mariann Budde’s sermon from the National Cathedral in January.

You may have heard of that one. It was the one on the day after the Inauguration which she ended with a request of the newly elected president to show mercy for those who are afraid as they watch their humanity diminished and their rights taken away.

In response, a widely circulated pundit posted a photo of Bishop Mariann with this caption: *“Do not commit the sin of empathy. This snake is God’s enemy and yours, too. She is not only deceived but she is a deceiver. Your eye shall not pity.”*

And another wrote that she was *“a clear example of the man-eating weed of Humanistic Mercy, untethered from biblical truth.”*

This, my brothers and sisters and gender siblings is all part of a pernicious playbook “othering” members of the human family in order to oppress and marginalize them – and is historically a necessary first step towards establishing an authoritarian regime by erasing the humanity of those with whom you disagree as a precursor to eradicating them.

So that’s one world view. One image of how God works. One Imago Dei.

Thankfully there’s another.

Our Collect of the Day – the prayer which began our worship this morning – offers **mercy** as a defining characteristic of the God in whose image we are created:

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy ...

Not whose glory it is to have vengeance, judgment, dominance or cruelty ... but mercy ... a quality defined by Merriam Webster as “to show compassion or forgiveness.”

The kind of mercy that led Jesus to preach a manifesto grounded in love, justice and compassion ... a theology exemplified in words like “inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these” and “love your neighbor as yourself.”

In the words of our friend and sister Diana Butler Bass: “Empathy is not a sin. It is the strength of humane and civilized people and societies. It is the source of all that is good in our common life. To say differently is evil.”

We are scholars of our own story. And what story will we tell of the Imago Dei ... for the record spelled “D.E.I.” ... we will choose to pattern our lives on?

The DEI of **division, exclusion and ignorance** embraced by Christian Nationalism or the DEI of **diversity, equity and inclusion** incarnated by the one who loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another?

We get to choose this day.

And we get to re-choose every day as we choose how to live out our lives as images of the God who created us in love and calls us to live out that love in actions large and small.

For when we see every member of the human family as created in the image of God, **who** we stand up for ceases to be a question we ask ... the question instead becomes **how** do we stand up.

Maybe you've seen this adaptation of Pastor Martin Niemöller's famous 1946 "First They Came" making the rounds on social media:

**First they came for the trans people ... and I stood up
because I've read the rest of the [expletive deleted] poem.**

Well, we have read the rest of the poem, too.

And so our congregational response to those coming for our transgender siblings has been to hang – and then re-hang (after multiple incidents of vandalism over the last two weeks) our "Transgender Rights Are Human Rights" banner on the lawn and our Pride flag over the church door.

And our Bishop John Taylor's response was to offer these words in a public statement of solidarity and an affirmation of the doctrine of Imago Dei in action in our beautiful and broken world:

"I stand with The Episcopal Church in drawing this line. I stand with the baptismal covenant, which demands that we respect the dignity of every human being. ... You don't move to the center on human rights. Human rights are left, right, and center. In the land of the free, everyone's inalienable rights must be taken into account. Acting as though someone's rights don't matter is like saying they're less than human. The Christian's way in these days must be to insist on government that respects the dignity of every human being."

Every human being.

The Christian's way is in these days to choose this day and every day how we will do that work in the world ... and while we did not choose the challenges that face us in this hinge moment in our congregation, our community, our nation and our world it IS the work in front of us as we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us -- as we tell and re-tell the stories of which we are stewards.

The story of Abram – who became Abraham – and God’s promise to create a way out of no way ... a promise Abram trusted against all odds. The story of the Psalmist who calls out to God in times of deep trouble and distress trusting that God is with them even in the depth of the struggle. The story of Jesus who when warned that Herod is trying to kill him doubles down on those who tell him to run with this throw down: “Go tell that fox ‘Today and tomorrow, I will be casting out devils and healing people, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’”

And Lent is the season we reprogram our spiritual GPS to live out our part in that story in the work we have been given to do. It is the time we commit ourselves to realigning ourselves with the grain of the universe which is love in order to share what we know, what we value, and to spin a force of the Spirit that reaches back to ancient campfires and out to a tomorrow we cannot yet imagine a tomorrow where the myth of redemptive violence is banished and the reign of God’s love, justice and compassion has come on earth as it is in heaven.

There are moments when that can seem like an impossible dream but in those moments, we claim the promise of Walter Wink ... *“History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being.”* ... and we persist.

Strengthened by our stories our own stories and the stories we learn through love may we be given the grace to believe that future into being as we become the change we want to see in the world. Amen.