



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Image of God

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 7, 2020

Trinity Sunday

Based on Genesis 1:1-2:4a; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Use our anger to melt the swords of hate.

Use our tears to water thirsty ground.

Grant us courage to love all you create;

Come to us and turn the world around.¹

Amen.

What does God look like to you? Think, for a moment, about the depictions of God that have shaped your understanding of Christianity from childhood to the present. The Children's Bibles of my youth stereotypically imagined God the Father as an old, white, bearded man in the sky and Jesus as a young, white, bearded man here on earth. When I went to Church as a child, a triumphant Christ cast in pale limestone peered down at his subjects from afar. Later, in my college art history class, we studied masterpiece after masterpiece in which God was both male and white.

Morgan Freeman and Whoopi Goldberg may have played God in the movies, but white American culture has long equated divinity with whiteness and masculinity. If you don't believe me, consider what God looks like even in this place many of us think of as progressive and diverse. The magnificent mosaic above the high altar features a Caucasian Jesus flanked by a Caucasian Moses and a Caucasian Elijah and accompanied by a Caucasian Peter, a Caucasian James, and a Caucasian John. The painting of the Epiphany above the altar nods at the principle of inclusion by portraying the three Magi as men of different ethnicities, but all three Magi kneel before a Virgin and a Child whose complexions are like mine. Consider, too, how often God is mediated through white male voices here—how the overwhelming majority of the prayers we pray and the musical selections we sing were written by white men, how the people who have stood in this pulpit over the years have disproportionately been male and white. It's pretty sobering, if you stop to think about it.

"Let us make humankind in our image," God says, "according to our likeness." Then God immediately follows through on that intention. "So God created humankind in his image," Genesis tells us—and, as if to emphasize the point, Genesis repeats itself: "in the image of God he created them," before further specifying that "male and female he created them." Genesis makes clear that multiplicity is at the heart of divinity. The narrator of Genesis may use the singular male pronoun for God, but the God of Genesis uses the first person plural for Godself. By creating human beings—both male and female—in God's image, God reveals an identity that is neither male nor female only; God reveals an identity that is male and female and something else entirely all at the same time. God's unconventional gender identity not only paves the way for our modern challenges to binary notions of gender; God's unconventional gender

¹ "Lament" Mark Miller & Adam Tice. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUoK9Ulbu70>.

identity also reminds us that the full diversity of humanity reflects the full diversity of God. When we insist that God is only male or only white, the face of God becomes an idol of our own making, not the true face of the divine.

The trouble, of course, is that we do not decide God's gender and God's race all by ourselves. The artwork in this building was installed before most of us were born; the hymnal and prayer books we use were assembled forty years ago; the Children's Bibles we read in our younger years were bought for us by others—and the purchasers of those bibles probably didn't have very many options from which to choose. By the time many of us can influence the depictions of God we encounter, the image we have of God is already deeply embedded in us. It doesn't matter that I know better—I will likely always think first of that old white man in my children's bible when I hear the word "God." That's how systemic racism and other forms of oppression work: they influence our thoughts, our perceptions, our words, and our actions before we even know they are there, and their effects are insidious and long-lasting despite all our efforts to eradicate them.

I raise this issue not because I'm concerned that God will be upset at being misidentified. God, I'm sure, can handle it. I raise this issue because I suspect that how we think of God has a profound impact on how we think of other human beings. If we see only whiteness and only maleness in God, will we really be able to see God's image in our fellow human beings and will we truly be able to treat them with the dignity they deserve? Just this year Stanford psychologist Steven Roberts published a study in which he examined how conceptions of God might affect hiring practices. "When Christians conceptualized God as white and male," a summary of Roberts' research noted, "they rated white male job applicants more favorably than white female job applicants, who were rated more favorably than black male and black female candidates." "The conception of a white male God," Roberts concluded, "which we are constantly exposed to [in our surrounding culture], has important consequences for who we think should and should not be in charge." "Basically," he explained, "if you believe that a white man rules the heavens, you are more likely to believe that white men should rule the Earth."² And I would hazard to add to Roberts' assertion that it's not too difficult to imagine how one could go from believing that white men should rule the Earth to believing that black lives don't matter.

Over the past few weeks, we have collectively grieved the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many other black Americans who died at the hands of police or self-appointed vigilantes while most white folks weren't paying that much attention. We are rightfully indignant at horrifically unjust systems and at the people in power who allow such systems to flourish. But if those of us who are white focus solely on police departments in other cities or on the person who sits in the White House, we profoundly miss the point of the present moment. We overlook the ways, both large and small, in which we ourselves daily participate in, enable and uphold a culture of white supremacy—a culture that has taken shape and modulated itself over the course of many centuries. This culture impacts where we go to school, what kind of work we do, how much money we have, whom we date and marry, how healthy we are, whether we are stopped by police, whether we go to prison—almost every aspect of our lives.

Yesterday I was texting with a friend who is also a priest. He, too, was reflecting on the lectionary readings for this week, which is why his text to me sounded a little bit like a sermon. This is what he wrote: "At risk of being vulnerable and embarrassed I'll share that I've never encountered such blatant racism under the guise of preference than during my own foray into online dating several years ago. You'd be shocked at the things people say. Society has deemed our romantic preferences above reproach. But apply that approach more broadly. We may like to think of our preferred worship styles, for instance, as mere 'preferences,' but can we admit they are profoundly shaped by a Eurocentrism we must

² Melissa De Witte. "Who people believe rules in heaven influences their beliefs about who rules on Earth, Stanford scholars find." <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/01/31/consequences-perceiving-god-white-man/>.

acknowledge? It is our vocation as Christian leaders to expand our capacity for recognizing the deepest, truest beauty that is: the image of God in the other.”

I’ll admit with some reluctance that I haven’t always known what to think over the course of the last thirteen days. I helped to found a racial justice group at my last church and participated in it weekly for more than two years; I’ve read many of the books you’re supposed to read on the issue; I’ve protested and preached and delved into difficult conversations—and yet still I’ve managed to minimize the monstrosity that was George Floyd’s murder in my interior dialogues with myself during these past two weeks. I’ve looked askance at the looting and the burning; I’ve wondered why protesters have flouted guidance on COVID-19; I’ve felt paralyzed by all the noise on social media. In all of this, I’ve exhibited what Robin DiAngelo calls (in the Peace Book Club selection for next Sunday) “white fragility,” prioritizing my comfort and security over human dignity, preferring to ignore blatant evidence of heinous oppression rather than to confront my own privilege and power.³ But I’m trying to resist that tendency. In spite of white fragility’s strong grip on me, I’m trying my best to follow a Savior who emptied himself, who chose holy disorder over unholy calm, who declared that he came not to bring peace but a sword, who toppled tables in the temple to shock the satisfied out of their complacency and show them what really matters.

Black lives matter. When a black woman is killed while sleeping in her bed, when a black man is murdered while jogging down the street, when a white police officer presses his knee into a black man’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds even as he cries out, “I can’t breathe,” the sacred likeness of God is appallingly profaned. Right now—in our hearts, on the Internet, and on the streets—we are being asked if we will recognize the deepest, truest beauty that is, if we will honor the image of God in one another—and if we will continue to do so moving forward.

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³ Robin DiAngelo. *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Beacon Press, 2018.