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## Image-Bearers

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

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When I was a freshman in college studying music—back when dinosaurs roamed the earth (apparently, to one of my girls)—I had a professor by the name of Dr. Music. That’s right, Dr. Music was my Professor of Music. How cool is that?! On the name alone, we assigned him the highest level of authority when teaching us about hymnology and church music history. How could he not know everything?! To us students, it was like he belonged to some society of right-brained super heroes, right beside Dr. Sculptor and Professor Poetry. Like, he could at any point tear open that professorial white button-down shirt to reveal a music clef underneath. But Dr. Music was a real person—that is, unless teachers, too, take on stage names fitted to their careers.

In another season of life, my fourth grade teacher was Mrs. Artist... and she was the best art teacher! Ok, that part isn’t true. That would start to sound like some *Truman Show* kind of setup. Mrs. Artist was actually my homeroom teacher. But being that I was into art as a young person before I got into music, I always felt that *that* was very ironic too. In retrospect, it was all quite serendipitous, the way art and music became my professional vocation for a couple of decades.

Now, by contrast, my last name *Eller*, offers me nothing to aspire to. My family name is more of an ending to other words, like “Seller” or “Teller” or “Old Yeller”. Maybe I’m just reliving some of my Middle School name-calling days here. I do know it has German origins and was given as a surname to a people who lived near certain typography, such as the alder tree, or a hill—both of which aren’t true of me today. I feel like I’ve let my people down.

I’ve come to learn that there is a fancy term to describe how people will sometimes choose careers paths, hobbies, or paths in life that reflect their names. It’s called Nominative Determinism. Consider some of these real life

examples: There's Dr. Stephan Bone who became an orthopedic surgeon, Amy Freeze, the television meteorologist, Sue Yoo ("Y.o.o") who was a lawyer, and we all remember Usain Bolt who was a record-breaking sprinter. These are all real people. Nominative Determinism. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are subconsciously influenced by the names we carry.

What names are you trying to live into these days? We are comprised of a whole web of identities that is pulling on us at any one time. The Swiss Psychologist, Carl Jung, said: "The world will ask who you are, and if you do not know, the world will tell you." This week, what has the world called you?

Consumer.

Employee.

Caretaker.

Boss.

Producer.

Citizen.

Foreigner.

Peace-keeper.

Asset.

Liability.

Which names cling to you like wet, heavy clothes? Which names feel like armor? Which do you carry with shame, or is burdensome? Which ones don't feel like you at all, but you carry them nonetheless? Beneath all of them, beneath the noise of expectation and performance, there is still a deeper question: When God looks at you — by what name does Love claim you? This is a question of deepest identity. Before anyone gets to name you, you have to know what name hums at the center of who you are.

We are kicking off Pride month tomorrow. Many friends in the queer community will often take on new names as a way of reclaiming what they feel is their truest self. In many cases, there is a painful incongruence with the way they've been named and how they feel about themselves. And the way they often talk about this renaming, you don't get the sense that it's the creation of a new identity altogether, but a movement away from what's been handed to them, a resistance to misplaced expectation and identity, in an act to reclaim their deepest center that was there all along. Well, we here at PCL boldly stand with our LGBTQIA

friends and family, and believe that every person at their core is a beloved child of God, just as they are. It's the free space on everyone's bingo card.

The prophet Isaiah, speaking the words of God to a fearful people who had been displaced, and perhaps forgotten their identity, said this:

"Remember who created you, O Jacob?

Who shaped you, O Israel?

See, you have nothing to fear. I, who made you,  
will take you back.

I have chosen you, named you as My own." (43:1)

It's so important to internalize this word. What this means is because you are named by God, you have been given inherent dignity and worth that no one can take away. This means, we all start from a place of acceptance and belovedness. And knowing this... letting this be your center will change all the other identities you layer on top. This is why the Bible says, "Guard your heart, for from it flow the springs of life." (Prov. 4:23) Can you imagine how starting your day with the assurance that you are loved and accepted can change the way you live into all the other hats you are being asked to wear? No longer would you expect those identities to bring you a sense of wholeness and peace. And when those other identities tug and pull at you, if you cultivated the practice of guarding your heart, you have that muscle-memory to take that on from a place of belovedness.

What is true for you and me, is also true of everyone you will encounter. You will never meet a person who isn't the beloved of God. I find this beautifully expressed in the Sanskrit greeting *Namaste*, literally meaning "The divine in me bows to the divine in you." That's lovely, even if it challenges us a bit. Because we all know that just because you've been identified in a certain way doesn't mean you necessarily will act in a way befitting of that name. And so, many wander far from the name they've been called. They live with other names at their core. And the springs which flow from that source can be toxic, even violent, waters.

This topic is near and dear to my heart. I grew up in a Christian tradition that didn't preach belovedness. In that tradition, you don't begin from Genesis 1. For or all intents and purposes, the Gospel, for these, is rooted in Genesis chapter 3, and the fall of humanity. This emphasized human depravity, the idea

that something is broken at its very core. It turns out, if you can get people to believe they are broken and worthless from the start, they might do just about anything to gain their worth. That shaming becomes a tool for membership.

The doctrine of Original Sin was given its language and structure by Saint Augustine in the 4th century. And it makes the claim that everyone is born marred, damaged, and wretched... essentially defective at birth. It leads many, like the 17th century author and preacher, Joseph Alleine, to say things like, "God finds nothing in man to turn His heart, but enough to turn his stomach." And it shows up in some of our beloved hymns: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a *wretch* like me." The German reformer, Martin Luther, would also preach that humans are depraved not only to their very core but to such a degree that nothing can be done to change it. He said, "Inherited sin in a man is like his beard, though shaved off today so the man is very smooth . . . it grows back by tomorrow morning."

And so much Christian violence has been done in the name of this view of human identity. Because when you have the authority (in their eyes, divine authority) to see and name someone as depraved, you strip them of dignity and can treat them as less than. When we revisit the beautiful poetry of Genesis 1, we find an origin story much different than the doctrine of Original Sin. We cannot read anything other than an Original Goodness. The text says, humankind is created in God's image, the *Imago Dei*. In the original Hebrew, the word is "Tzelem". "Tzelem Elokim", the "image of God".

What is an image? Well, in ancient times, an image would be constructed in the form of a statue or icon to be a representational stand-in for a king or a deity. So, statues were quite common everywhere. But, you wouldn't mistake them for the real thing. It was there to call to the mind of the observer all the attributing characteristics of what is being represented. So that it would be as if the person or god it represented were there in flesh.

Just by virtue of being human, we are images of God. It doesn't matter if you are strong or weak, short or tall, you speak well, you don't speak at all, old or young. You are the image of your Creator. Also, how you treat the image is how you treat the thing it represents. How you treat human images is how you are treating the Creator those images represent. This is why John will say in 1 John 4, "If someone claims, 'I love God,' but hates his brother or sister, then he is a liar." (4:20). This is why the greatest command is to love God... but to also love

your neighbor. Or Jesus, teaching his disciples, said: Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me. How you treat the images, is how you treat what they are representing. We will be talking more about what it means to be *Imago Dei* next Sunday, and the associated responsibilities.

But, today, let me leave you with one other word from our origin story. In Genesis 1, the passage is filled with the word “good”, in the Hebrew, *Tov*. On days 3 through 6, God was hovering over the unformed waters, creating the world, and “God saw that [what was created was] good” — “Tov”. It is a word that actually means something more along the lines of unity and harmony — in terms of relationship: God saw that all things were in beautiful harmony, with each other and with its Creator. Nothing else was needed. This is symbolized by the garden. Everything was in “right relationship” with each other, a starting place of union, not division. But we cannot miss that on Day 6, when God creates humankind, it was not just “Tov”, it was “Tov Me’od” — “very good”! This speaks of abundance, almost in an emphatic kind of way. It was radically and overwhelmingly unified, and whole. It was “very good!”

Dear siblings, before you begin your new week, for whatever lies ahead for you and me, hear the good news of God’s Word for us today: We are “Tzelem Elokim”, the “image of God”, and we are “Tov Me’od”, “very good”. This is our truest self. The charge then, as beloved children of God, is to live into the name you’ve been given. With God’s help, may it be so. Amen.