

## MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

**TEXT:** Galatians 3:23-29

In the beginning God created everything. And everything God created is good. And God's ultimate creation – humans – are made in God's image. And everything God created was good. All of humankind is the work of the ultimate master artist. Think about the implications of that statement. Why is an original Renoir worth millions of dollars, but a print of the same image is worth around \$29.95? Because the original is the work of the master artist's hands. In a similar way, all humankind, whether black, white, Hispanic, Asian, mixed-race or any other race – is the work of God, the Creator's hands. All humankind, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, even pagan, is the work of God. All humankind, whether heterosexual, LGBTQI, or transgender, is the work of God. This biblical truth asserts the value of all people and leaves no room for racism. This applies to any other exclusion that humans can conjure up.

How have we forgotten this? How has the church, which claims its heritage from the words of scripture, forgotten this? It seems to me that we have developed a kind of “us against them” thinking and that thinking has pervaded human culture. It would seem that regardless of time or place, regardless of status or faith, members of the human family have a deeply ingrained need to differentiate themselves from others they can look down on. Whether it surfaces in wars between nations, ethnic and racial hatred, or social discrimination, it seems we are obsessed with defining our own worth in competition with others.

I have never understood the blatant, mean-spirited racism and other “isms” that infect some people on this planet. I don't understand how anyone can look at another person and think of that person as some kind of sub-human animal. What disturbs me deeply is when people take those notions and turn them into a badge of loyalty or a mark of patriotism – or even into a medal of faith! For many people, it seems that Christian faith just becomes another way of justifying our cherished prejudices.

I was appalled when I received an e-mail the other day, which was inadvertently directed to a group list of recipients rather than the intended recipient.

“Billy Graham’s son is telling the sad truth”, the message read “Never said better”, she commented. The message quoted Franklin Graham speaking at the First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, where he said America will not come back. Here is a portion of what he wrote:

‘The American dream ended on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012. The second term of Barack Obama has been the final nail in the coffin for the legacy of the white Christian males who discovered, explored, pioneered, settled and developed the greatest republic in the history of mankind.

‘A coalition of blacks, Latinos, feminists, gays, government workers, union members, environmental extremists, the media, Hollywood, uninformed young people, the ‘forever needy’, the chronically unemployed, illegal aliens and other ‘fellow travelers’ have ended Norman Rockwell’s America.

“You will never again out-vote these people. It will take individual acts of defiance and massive displays of civil disobedience to get back the rights we have allowed them to take away. It will take zealots, not moderates and shy, not reach-across-the aisle RINOs to right this ship and restore our beloved country to its former status.

“People like me are completely politically irrelevant, and I will probably never again be able to legally comment on or concern myself with the aforementioned coalition which has surrendered our culture, our heritage and our traditions without a shot being fired.

“The Cocker spaniel is off the front porch, the pit bull is in the back yard. The American Constitution has been replaced with Saul Alinskiy’s ‘Rules for Radicals’ and the likes of Chicago shyster David Axelrod along with international socialist George Soros have been pulling the strings on their beige puppet and have brought us Act 2 of the New World Order.

Graham concludes: “The curtain will come down but the damage has been done, the story has been told. Those who come after us will once again have to risk their lives,

their fortunes and their sacred honor to bring back the Republic that this generation has timidly frittered away due to white guilt and political correctness...”

My reaction was swift and almost volatile. My gut said to send a ‘Reply All’ message expressing my horror that this was ever spoken, let alone reported to large groups of people. I was ready to submit my resignation to the organization to which it was sent, but I realize that this is the view of just one member, not the platform for the group. But, there is no acceptable reason for a white-supremacy agenda in our nation – or in our world.

But the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and father of Jesus the Christ, is not as portrayed by Franklin Graham or others who would promote bigotry in any form. The God of the Scriptures is the God who is concerned about “all the families of the earth”. With that in mind, and given Jesus’ acceptance of all people, we might want to believe that the church would be a “hate-free” or “discrimination-free” zone. Unfortunately, it is not.

Over the last few months, we United Methodists have been hearing about the work of the Commission on the Way Forward with, now, anticipation growing for the special called General Conference, which will convene in St. Louis on February 26 to determine what the way forward will be regarding the language in our Discipline about human sexuality. For some of us this upcoming meeting has been interesting, for others it’s been painful, for others frustrating, and for still others, it hasn’t even come across our screen.

The players in this drama start with the naming of a Commission on the Way Forward, a group of 32 United Methodists, commissioned by the Council of Bishops. So we’re clear here, the Council of Bishops consists of all of the active and retired Bishops from across the global United Methodist connection. They function together as the executive branch for the denomination. At the General Conference of 2016 this body, the Commission on the Way Forward, was asked to lead the church when it came to a

stalemate relating to LGBT Inclusion. This Commission met various times since the 2016 General Conference and this year submitted a report which included three plans for moving forward. All three recommendations will come before the body that will gather next month.

The Commission's recommendation is for the "One Church Plan", which would delete the exclusionary language currently in the Book of Discipline and allow each local church to make its own decision about how they will respond/include LGBT congregants and requests for marriage. So, Church A might openly advertise that the LGBT community is welcome. Church B might encourage and ask for an openly gay pastor, as well as advertise its support of gay marriage, including in its facility. Church C might not say anything one way or the other. And Church D might be open in their stance that they do not support lesbian or gay relationships, while still relating to each individual as a child of God. Under this plan each Annual Conference would have more autonomy in setting standards for the ordination of qualified candidates with regard to their orientation.

The second option, called the "Connectional Conference Plan", would form three overlapping "Connectional Conferences", each defined by rules concerning same sex marriage. Each Annual Conference could then decide which Conference it preferred and affiliate with that particular one. This would be an extremely complicated process.

The third option, called the "Traditional Plan", would keep current policy and practice of the UMC for the whole denomination, while adding more enforcement of the current restrictive discipline language. If anyone would like additional information or clarification of these options and the process that has been followed, and will follow, let me know and I'll provide more details.

I would ask that we pray for our church and our denomination. It seems to me that if we would only stand by Jesus' great commandment that that we love each other and love our neighbor as ourselves, all of this would be nonsense.

In her book, *The Strength of the Weak*, Dorothee Solle recounts the story of a rabbi who asked his students how one could recognize the time when night ends and day begins.

“Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?” one student asked. “No,” said the rabbi.

“Is it when from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?” another student asked. “No,” said the rabbi.

“Then when is it?” the students asked.

“It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or your sister there. Until then, night is still with us.” Amen.