

Knox Presbyterian Church, Victoria, B.C. Sunday, February 20, 2011

The Rev. Cathy Victor

Genesis 1: 26-27    Psalm 63: 1-8    Colossians 1: 15-20    John 14: 8-14

### **"In the image of God"**

Every now and then the funniest thing happens to me. It's when I introduce my daughter Rachel or my daughter Letha to someone. The reaction is usually the same. 'Whew! You can sure tell whose daughter she is!' – "My goodness she looks like you." - Like mother, like daughter, and so on.

A number of times I've also met friends of my mother who lives in Edmonton. Their reaction is usually something like:

"My goodness- you must be Flo's daughter. I'd recognize that face anywhere."  
'You are the spitting image of your mother.' There are plenty of strong family resemblances in my family, and I'm sure that you recognize the same things in your family.

At the very least, most of us eventually look in the mirror or catch a glimpse of ourselves in a window and it suddenly dawns on us, that we look just like our moms ...or dads. This morning we heard that beautiful passage in the beginning of Genesis where it says, "The Lord God said, 'Let us create human beings in our image. Male and female, God created them.'"

This passage was written at a time when the community of faith had a very negative self-image.

They had been hauled away from their homeland to Babylon. They had suffered terribly; they had lost their sense of power and strength and identity. A very great theological, spiritual writer -- we do not know his or her name; we just call this writer, "The Priestly Writer" -- wanted to remind people that they bore the image of God in their very being.

"And the Lord God created them, male and female."

In a way, what the passage is saying is,

"I'd know that face anywhere.

You are the very image of the one who has birthed you, who has made you, who has nurtured you."

Consider, just briefly, what this would mean for our society, a society that is always trying to sell us on the image that we need in order to be acceptable -- the number of catalogues you get; the number of commercials on TV always telling you how you have to look; what you have to achieve in order to be somebody.

What this passage says is that you are already someone very special.

"Why I'd recognize that face anywhere. You are the very image of God."

Colossians shows us the image of a crucified man wearing a crown of thorns.

King Jesus. The wounded healer. The bloodied reconciler. The one who lays down his life for others.

Colossians shows us Jesus our king, the one who turns all other ideas of kingship inside out.

The apprentice of his earthly father, Joseph the carpenter.

A village man who becomes an itinerant preacher and healer.

A misunderstood man who spends nights out on the hills. The saviour trusted by prostitutes and tax collectors. Friend of foreigners and fishermen. A servant washing the feet of guests.

The wanted man slipping through city streets by night. A soul in agony, praying in an Olive grove.

The young rabbi betrayed by a disciple. A host with wounded hands, cooking a fish breakfast for his friends on the shores of Galilee. The ever living One, The Alpha and Omega, separated by a cloud from his disciples, so that he might incognito be with them always.

Think of what it means to bear the image of God, if you are a young person who is attracted to gangs, or if for some reason, you're worried that you aren't acceptable or good enough. You don't have to worry about that. You already are somebody of unique and wondrous value. You – each of you – are people who bear the image of God.

"You are the very image of the one who made you." If you are somebody who is growing old, very old perhaps, and you have lost the strength you once had -- maybe your hands are gnarled with arthritis, maybe you don't have the energy you once had -- you think back to when you were a youth. You see how this society loves youth as though that is the only way to be. This passage says, "You bear the very image of God. You are as valuable and as precious now as you were the day you were born."

To bear the image of God is to see ourselves differently, but not just ourselves.

It is to see everyone else differently as well. Sometimes this is very difficult for us.

We see someone who is really different from us and we think of them as the stranger, the alien, and we become very frightened by them.

Maybe it is their religious differences; maybe it is their ethnic or their cultural differences, but they bear this image of God just as unmistakably as we do.

It is not always because someone is just different.

We may even fail to see how even those we love are the very image of the God who made them. Christ moves incognito among all of us.

I work for the Garth Homer Society. It is a day program for adults who are mentally and physically disabled. We have folks who come there from the ages of 18 to 80.

Most of the people that I work with have early onset dementia as well.

Every now and then I just can't help but see the image of God, the face of Christ, in both our clients as well as my co-workers.

Music plays a significant role in the lives of many of our clients' lives.

Once a week a group of these folks head off to an amazing event.

It goes like this.

Slowly a crowd begins to gather at a large community church in Saanich that hosts them.

Young and old, disabled, (mentally, physically,) able bodied, - they all slowly

Gather into the sanctuary. Some carry shakers, drums, tambourines; some just take a seat.

Before long the sanctuary is overflowing into the narthex. Then the musicians suddenly seem to appear from out of the crowd. They've been busy chatting with folks, but all of a sudden the baby grand is filling the space with the sounds of Elvis or John Denver.

A lead guitarist takes his place by one of the mikes, and soon he is surrounded by a surprising host of young and old. Some bring their own guitars. They don't really know how to play them, but it still sounds beautiful. Some bring fake microphones and pretend to be the soloist. Even my autistic friend Jimmy proudly takes his place up front with his drum and joins in with all his might. For one brief hour, it is difficult to tell who has disabilities – so to speak – and who doesn't because caregivers and clients alike are dancing, singing, clapping and swaying together in unison.

The first few times I went, I had a terrible time telling some of the caregivers apart from the clients. There was the guy in the 3 piece black suit with the ten gallon black cowboy hat. I was sure he was a 'client.' But no.

There was a guy who looked like Ron James, the lady who sits with a doll rocking back and forth to the rhythms every week...the ones dancing swing to 'You ain't nothing but a hound dog!' or 'Jailhouse Rock.' As the hour progresses, the differences disappear, and the barriers dissolve, And the music swells. It seems like an underground association of people who don't care about appearance anymore and who feel safe just being who they are.

It is a gift, given from the musicians to those disabled folk who come, but given back to the musicians and caregivers by all those who have 'disabilities.' I'm not trying to sentimentalize working with the disabled. Many of our clients can be just as angry, deceitful or annoying as anyone else can be from time to time. But sometimes it seems so easy to be able to catch a glimpse of God's face there. Christ is there. I just know it. I can't help but imagine that heaven must be a bit like this. There is so much joy, it has to be. Whatever you do to the least of these, you do it to me, Jesus says. We all bear his image. I have seen it in my friends where I work.

A number of years ago when I was working as chaplain at the Children's hospital in Ottawa, I had an encounter with a young boy at the hospital. I had asked him what he thought God was like. He said with firmness in his voice,

"God is very powerful....God is kind.....and God is Handsome." How wonderful, especially since God's imprint is on him, and he is in the image of the God that he described to me.

Take the time to imagine, to consider this truth, that the image of God  
Is in those around you, - in your spouse, in your friends, and your neighbors.

It is there, and we need to celebrate it. As a matter of fact, it is not just knowing about the image of God and seeing how it changes, how we see ourselves or how we see others.

It does something else as well.

It brings a change in how we act and how we treat one another.

If I think of you as the enemy or the 'other',

that makes it impossible for us to have a creative or a reconciling relationship.

If I see that you are the very image of the one who created you,

just as I also am, - think of what that does for each of us.

Our life becomes a way of drawing forth all that is best from each other's heart,

all that is best in each other's gifts.

This is why the early church, particularly the writer of Colossians, said of Jesus,

"He is the very image of the invisible God."

What they meant by that is when we look at Jesus and we see Him feeding the hungry, we see the image of God in action.

When we look at Jesus and see Him healing somebody who is broken and in need, we see the image of God in action.

This very deeply beautiful idea of the image of God in action

is not by any means confined to those of us who call ourselves Christian.

Imagine a world where all of us looked at everyone and said,

"Why, I'd know that face anywhere. It is the very image of the God who made us all; the spitting image.

Rev. Cathy Victor

- With ideas from Tom Troeger.