

What do you see in this picture? Do you see God? The people if God have a long history of debate about exactly what's meant in Genesis 1:26, "Beings made in our image...reflecting our nature."¹ Since it appears so early in our Bible, it's not even a uniquely Christian idea. Clearly it doesn't mean that our faces or bodies literally look like God. Early philosophers felt that it simply meant that people were set apart from the rest of creation as special, which we certainly know to be true. Consciousness and the ability to speak have been suggested as a more specific meaning.² John Wesley saw the image of God in three ways: We are spiritual beings with freedom of will; We are political beings, stewards of the created world and engaged in relationships with others; and we are moral beings, intended for holiness and righteousness.³ Every person is created with this image of God as a central part of their being, and there's nothing that can happen to remove it. It can, and has, however, been marred by sin. Not because of the bad choices we've made in our lives, but because of the original sin of pride in the Garden of Eden. It's not our sin that makes us sinners, it's that we're sinners, bearing a warped image of God, that leads us to sin. And so we do. The image of God has been distorted in each of us, so that perhaps it looks more like these scribbles than what God intended. That's exactly why we need Jesus and the rebirth Jesus offers, to restore the image of God in our lives.

Bearing the restored image of God is a necessary part of walking the way of love. It's essentially what we mean when we say we're walking in the footsteps of Jesus. It actually goes quite a bit beyond the question, "What would Jesus Do?" and cuts to the core of who we are. Bearing the restored image of God is crucial because accepting the spiritual nature of our existence allows us to be firmly grounded in the love of God. Recognizing our free will is an important admission that we bear responsibility for our choices in this life, choices to love or choices to be unloving. Accepting our role as God's stewards of creation and relationships raises the expectations of love even higher, because stewards are called to be responsible and thoughtful overseers of the long-term good of what they are stewarding in

¹ Genesis 1:26. The Message.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image_of_God

³ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-meant-by-the-term-image-of-god>

love. And finally, recognizing our moral image of God necessitates our acknowledgement of what is right and wrong, in God's eyes and in our attitudes and actions. Our moral image allows us to love in Godly ways that are whole and holy, not in the broken ways of the world.

If that all sounds a bit overwhelming to you, it should! Being created in the image of our creator for purposes that are eternal and holy should sound daunting. But walking the way of love was never intended to be an overwhelming, impossible task. We make it so, because we forget one of the most crucial expectations that God has of us, an expectation that brings with it the healing grace of God. Let's see if we can spot it in the Gospel of Mark as Jesus instructs one of the teachers of religious law. I'm starting in chapter 12, verse 28, in the New Living Translation.

{Read Mark 12:28-34 NLT}

I love this passage for so many reasons. For one, it's one of the few times in the Scriptures that Jesus actually gives some credit to one of the religious teachers, who usually are the recipients of his harshest criticisms. I also love that it reveals how rooted Jesus is in the Old Testament law, as he quotes from the Shema in Deuteronomy and also from Leviticus.⁴ If you've ever been in Youth Group with Curtis, you've prayed the Shema at the end of your time together. That's not because we're Jews, it's because the way of love, the Jesus way of love, is rooted in all of God's Word, not just the New Testament.

But what I love about this passage most of all is the part that's likely the most neglected, and that's really too bad, because without it, even though Jesus has simplified things for us by giving us a two-part summary, it still can feel like an overwhelming expectation. I'm talking about the last part of the second commandment: Not just "love your neighbor," but "love your neighbor as yourself." We'll spend the rest of our time unpacking the implications of those two words, "as yourself."

Bishop Curry summarized the crux of the matter when he said, "You should love your neighbor as you love yourself. Yourself. Loving the self is a required balance. If we fail in that, we fail our neighbor, too. To love your neighbor is to relate to them as someone made

⁴ Deuteronomy 4:35, 6:4-6; Leviticus 19:18.

in the image of God. And it is to relate to yourself as someone made in the image of God. It's God, up, down, and all-around, and God is love.”⁵

Let's think about that for a minute. How well do you love yourself? I don't necessarily mean do you practice good self-care, do you get enough sleep and take vacations and things like that, although those are probably good ways to love yourself. I mean what's your basic attitude toward yourself? Is it one of unceasing criticism? Is it one of shame or doubt? Is it possible that those attitudes you have about yourself are shaping the attitudes and actions you take toward your neighbors? Just how effective can anyone be in loving someone else if they don't love themselves?

Asked another way, do you see and celebrate the image of God in yourself? Can you see how the gift of free-will enriches your relationship with creation, or are you more likely to see the bad choices you've accumulated over your lifetime? Can you celebrate your moral awareness and God's call for you to be holy, or are you more focused on the examples of your moral failings?

All people are created in the image of God, and walking the way of love requires that we see and celebrate the image of God in our neighbor as we do in ourselves. We can't be whole persons without loving both. As Bishop Curry writes, “Self-hatred is an easy trap to fall into... Somehow, when we come to love ourselves through God's eyes, and through loving others, we become whole again.”⁶

Love is not an abstract idea, it's a person. Jesus is the way of love, and so the call of Jesus on our lives is a call to walk the way of love. As Bishop Curry's father once reminded him as a teenager, “You know, the Lord didn't put you here just to consume oxygen!”⁷

There's a temptation in the church to assume that everyone, made in the image of God, is called to love in the same way. In one sense, that's true. We're all called to love in Jesus ways of love. But one of the great gifts God has given us is that each of us is a unique individual. We are united by one Spirit, One Baptism, and One Lord, but there's an almost infinite number of ways that we can express our love for God, our love for ourselves, and

⁵ Bishop Michael Curry. *Love Is the Way*, p. 96. Avery (2020).

⁶ Ibid, p. 106.

⁷ Ibid, p. 115.

our love for others.

Creativity is part of the image of God, but imagine all the ways there are to be creative in this world! Bonnie Kelly takes pictures. Ashley Lindeman paints. Loren VanDorp makes jewelry. Debbie and Kendall Bishop sing and play musical instruments. Some of you assemble puzzles or work with wood or work the land. God's love becomes more visible in this world when we express love using the ways that God has uniquely given us, and what we do becomes more than a job or an obligation, and more of a fulfilling of love's call. Learning to be the people God created us to be is an essential way that we learn to love ourselves and others. In the words of Bishop Curry, "When you discover your nature and live into it, self-love radiates. Others feel it and benefit from it. Your joy gives you an energy that helps you to love others as yourself."⁸

We all have baggage that gets in the way of loving ourselves and loving our neighbors. Sometimes it's leftovers from our families of origin. Sometimes it's the residuals of a past trauma. Oftentimes it comes from listening to the wrong voices over a lifetime of learning. Whatever your particular baggage is, the good news is that the image of God in your life has not been destroyed. Jesus can make it new, and help you to see yourself with new eyes. Let's pray for that right now. Loving God, we need your perfect love to renew your image in our lives. Give us eyes to see ourselves and each other the way you created us to be. Heal our damaged self-image and make us whole. And may the love we receive from you be multiplied in the lives of those we are called to love. Amen.

Please take some time now to reflect on how you can grow in loving yourself. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



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⁸ Ibid, p. 117.