



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
OUT OF THE MINDS OF CHILDREN: QUESTIONS OF FAITH

Why Did God Create Me? Genesis 11:1-9; Matthew 22:34-40

How often have you walked by something and not seen it? How many times have you suddenly noticed something and, when you pointed it out, were told that it had been that way for days or weeks . . . or years. As long as it is not your wife's new hairdo, your husband's new car, your friend's new pet, or your child's new tattoo, you're probably okay. We all get lost in the familiar.

Our children sometimes ask questions which, at first glance seem obvious to us. When we pay closer attention, however, we often discover that there is far more to that question than we have ever noticed. When the children and I talked here in the sanctuary a few months ago, two of our young men asked some obviously intriguing questions. Spencer Edwards asked, "Why did God create me?" and Connor Evans followed up with, "Why did God create us looking like we look?"

As we sat here in the quiet of a Sunday evening, I thought I had a fairly good grasp on the answers to those questions. My first response was one I have stated for years because I believe it to be our reason for our existence. It comes from the Westminster Confession which says, "The chief end of humanity is to love God and worship God forever."

You have often heard me say that the most important thing we do as Christians is worship. Our worship is an offering of gratitude to God for all that God does for us and the world. Furthermore, worship informs and influences everything else we do as Christians. Out of our gratitude to God we choose to learn more about God, to develop our talents in the service of God, and to meet the needs of the people around us who are also the children of God. Worship is the most important thing we do. We are created to worship God. That is how I answered Spencer's question a few months ago.

To answer Connor's question, I went immediately to the first chapter of Genesis, one of my favorite parts of the Bible. You will remember that after God had created light which divided night and day, after separating earth and

sky and waters and dry land, after creating animals and birds and creatures in the sea, after bringing forth all of the vegetation on the earth, God said:

“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

Genesis 1:26-28

I reminded the children that we are created in God’s image. That does not mean that when we look in the mirror, we are looking at what God would see in a mirror. It means that humans are gifted with souls which harbor our personalities. We have hearts and minds which provide us with compassion and intellect as well as creativity and possibility. We are unique creatures able to enjoy life and one another and God. To be created in the image of God means that we are God’s children. So we look the way we do because we reflect something important, something “spiritually genetic” about God.

I think what I told the children about those things is true. Yet, I have been looking in the mirror for close to six decades, and I have missed something vitally important. I have been looking at other people all of my life and I have not noticed something as plain as the nose on each of our faces. I did not really get it until the other day when I read an article about sparrows and preschoolers.

Kristin Adkins Whitesides is a minister of youth in Winchester, Kentucky. She wrote about a sparrow her seven year old son found which was missing a wing. He wanted to help the injured bird, so he and a neighbor prepared a safe place for it to rest until they could take it to a wildlife refuge for help.

On the way to the refuge, an amazing conversation occurred, not with the seven year old, but with his three year old brother. This young fellow wondered aloud how the other birds might treat a bird with only one wing. How would they ask it why it was different? How would the bird answer?

They talked about how various birds are different and how people are also different from one another. They discussed how sometimes a different bird or a person might feel as if they don't belong with the other birds or people. His mother pointed out that “. . . unlike most people, God seems to delight in differences. How else could you explain a flamingo or a platypus?” She continued to write:

I asked my son who he knew that was different from him. “Caira!” he said immediately, naming a friend from his preschool. “How are you and Caira different?” I asked him. “Caira has curly hair and I have straight hair,” he replied.

“That’s true! And you both have beautiful hair, even though it is different! How else are you different?” I wondered. “Caira has dark brown skin and I have light brown skin,” Samuel replied. “That’s true. And you are a boy and she is a girl. There are lots of ways that you are different. I wonder: How are you alike?”

Samuel thought for a while and then he said, “We both have feelings. And we like to play pretend. And she is my best friend.”¹

“God seems to delight in differences.” That statement opened my eyes. Most of the time, it seems, we focus on religion as a means of molding people into something similar. Anyone who belongs to a particular faith (no matter what it is) ought to think like everyone else in that faith. They ought to act in a certain way, and, in some cases, even dress in a prescribed way. When carried to an extreme, religion can become simply a way to make people conform to a particular way of thinking and acting. Cults are the best example of such extremes.

If, however, God delights in differences—as the story of creation and so many other passages of scripture suggest, why are we not more open to differences in other people? If God delights in differences, isn't there a reason? Should not we delight in differences as well?

I have often puzzled over the story of the tower of Babel. It makes sense that God would want to destroy something that would end in disaster

¹Kristin Adkins Whitesides, “Voices: God’s Eye is on the Sparrow,” Alliance Blog, Alliance of Baptists (July 2, 2015); available online at: http://allianceofbaptists.org/PCP/alliance_blog_detail/voices-gods-eye-is-on-the-sparrow-by-kristin-adkins-whitesides

for humanity anyway. Human desire to be like God is far different from God's desire to create humans in God's image. Our desire to be like God has more to do with power and possessions while God's desire to create us in God's image is more about insight, ingenuity, integrity, compassion, creativity, and sensitivity. Surely the story of the tower of Babel was one way to explain how people are scattered over the world and speak different languages. In that respect, it is a clever story.

I wonder, however, if the story does not tell us more than we are often willing to see. Up until that point, one would imagine, all people were essentially the same. Same hair, same skin color, same language, same everything. It must have looked like a prehistoric version of *John and Kate Plus Eight*, only, in those days, they were counting much higher.

Humanity, at this point, sounds so different from the rest of creation. Think of the Garden God created. It was filled with plants and animals of all kinds. Every fruit and vegetable, every flower and tree you can think of was there. All of the animals plus the ones we no longer have around were there. Colors were abundant and sound filled the air, not as a cacophony, but as an earthly symphony celebrating creation. The story of creation is about differences. It is about the beauty and wonder of different things created by a loving and imaginative God. I wonder if part of the story of the Tower of Babel is God's attempt to get humanity back on track with the rest of creation.

Why did God create you? Because he needed a Spencer. And God did not have anyone quite like a Connor, so God created one. And there was space for an Eliza Craig and a Madi and Ivy Larkin. God needed a Gilliam and a Reynolds, a Henry and an Annabelle because there were none quite like the ones we have. Even then, God looked around and realized that there was no Daniel or Chase or Caroline or Elizabeth or Maggie. God needed them so God created them. Something was still missing, so God ordered up a Bo, an Edward, a Will, and a Ramsey. In fact, God got so excited creating people, that God decided to experiment with height and hair and muscle and size. God kept trying different shades of skin and liked them all. God tested different voices and played with feet and noses. Then God started messing around with brains and realized the fun was only beginning. The arts and sciences exploded. Some people could dream amazing dreams which other people could make come true. Some people could imagine buildings and machines and their friends could make them. God kept tweaking people so that they could do all of the neat things the world needed and God said, "It is good—very good."

What we often overlook is the fact that our differences are really what unite us. Our differences fill in the gaps in the puzzle that is God's creation. I occupy one piece of the puzzle and you occupy another. No one else can fit my little space but neither can anyone else fit your space. When we all are tucked into our places, however, we create a magnificent picture that gives us a hint of what God is like because it is an image of God, something God might see when God looks in a heavenly mirror.

Jesus got it! Jesus saw it plainly. That is why Jesus accepted everyone who came his way. That is why his arms were always open. Apparently, that is also why Jesus made some people mad.

There are people in the world who think we would be better off if we were all the same. But which "same" would we be? What would the world be like today if the tower of Babel had been completed and God had not intervened? In truth, it would be a very different world. For one thing, no one would look like us. The people we read about in the book of Genesis were olive skinned or darker. Remember, Jesus himself was not white. He was Jewish. Some people don't like Jews. Some people don't like Arabs. Some people don't like Africans. Some people don't like Asians. Some people don't like Europeans. Some people don't like Native Americans. Some people don't like you and me. And some people don't really like themselves!

But Jesus paid attention. He noticed. And he got it! When someone asked him for the greatest commandment in the Jewish faith, they were asking him, "Why did God create us?". They were trying to trick Jesus. He outsmarted them, however, because Jesus was different. He handed them back one of their laws: Love God with everything you are and have—heart, soul, mind, and strength. Then he added another of their laws, one they had almost forgotten— and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus was different. He knew that the people wanted to love God but they did not really want to love their neighbor. They wanted the world to be all the same. They wanted it to be boring and uninteresting. The biggest problem, however, was that those people did not really love themselves so they were not able to love other people. But Jesus loved them. All of them. All of us!

Why did God create us? Why did God make us look like we do? God wanted companionship, a partner in creation. God wanted his human creation to be even more beautiful than all the animals in the garden. God wanted humanity to be like himself. He wanted human diversity to light up the landscape. And God had a sense of humor. So God created me—and

you—and all the rest of the people—for its own delight and for our enjoyment. Imagine if we began looking at one another as God's gifts to us. What if we saw one another as one of God's treasures rather than God's trash?

God created us for a purpose. We are to worship God. We are also here to enjoy one another. We are created and called to add beauty where it might be lacking, to be imaginative where new ideas have gone stale, to demonstrate God's creativity in the world. God delights in differences! Thank God that he does because we are all different—and happily so. Let us enjoy this gift of creation which is wondrously diverse. And let us enjoy one another because it is what God wants and why we are here. Amen.

July 12, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Lord of heaven and earth, as we consider the work of your hands, the majesty of your creation, we are awed that the Creator of all that we see and know and of things that we cannot even imagine, is also the God who breathed life into us and who knows us intimately and cares for us deeply. Your creation gives witness to your love of diversity and beauty, to your imagination and your faithfulness. Although we cannot fully comprehend it, we know that the mightiest mountains and oceans to the tiniest of creatures all reflect your glory, and your Word tells us that you sustain us and all of your creation as a loving Mother nurtures her children. We praise you, O God, that you have given us the gift of this beautiful planet we inhabit and the responsibility to care for it. We praise you that through our work and worship and play, you have allowed us to learn and grow and prosper. We praise you that you have given us one another for encouragement and companionship along this journey of life. Teach us, O Lord, to be trustworthy caretakers of these great gifts.

But we confess, O Lord, that too often we are careless with your blessings to us. Give us the wisdom not to squander or abuse the resources of this world but to be the stewards you have called us to be. Grant us the grace not to neglect the gift of our relationships with one another but to show mercy and compassion as we follow the example of Jesus our Lord. Give us the courage to stand against injustice wherever it exists and to recognize the dignity and worth in every person, affirming that each one is created in your image. Grant us patience and diligence and creativity as we work for healing and peace around the world, throughout our community and in our own lives.

So fill us with your love, O Lord, that we reflect your image in all circumstances and for all people.

We pray, O Lord, that as we embark on this journey of faith and mission we call Gatekeepers Workcamp, you would go ahead of us to prepare the way. Open the hearts and minds and lives of the homeowners we will serve that they might receive your touch of mercy and your word of hope through us. Open us that we might be used by you and receive a blessing through our work. Give us the words you would have us to say, the message you would have us to share, and so fill us with your love that it cannot help but overflow to all we meet. Strengthen us with the support and prayers of this church family, for which we give you our thanks. And we pray that you would mold and change the life of each one of us, that we might be bold enough to be about the work of your Kingdom by loving you with our whole selves and loving our neighbors as ourselves wherever or whenever you call us. We offer this and all our prayers in the name of Christ who is our strength for today and our hope for all the days to come. Amen.

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