

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Created for Care
Genesis 1:26 – 31

In our society of division, violence, and confusion, we need reminders of that which unites us. We need reminders of what it means to be a human being, the reasons for which humans were created. And so, we look to the story of creation in the book of Genesis, the story of our beginning. Today, we explore how human beings were created for care.

Last month, Alek and I went on our annual pilgrimage to an Airbnb near a lake with Alek's extended family. This family vacation was marked by the annual Euchre card game tournament and a new family resolution to exercise regularly. This family reunion, many of the aunties resolved that they would head to the pool every 11 o'clock for water aerobics, led by one of the swim instructors in the family.

Naturally, this opportunity to be active, stay cool, and make a fool of myself was *not* something that I was going to pass up, so I headed to the pool with my sunscreen in hand. It was a sunscreen made with zinc, which, unless you rub it in really well, will make you look like one of those old pictures of a sunbather with a white blob on his or her nose. I made sure to warn everyone before applying this sunscreen.

The family swim instructors commented that this was a good purchase. Certain kinds of zinc sunscreen is the current recommendation for open water swimming, and that certain areas with open water have actually banned the spray-on sunscreen.

This was something I'd never heard before, so I admitted my ignorance by asking, "Why?" "The Oxybenzone in spray-on sunscreen is harmful to coral reefs," they said. This was the first time I had heard of Oxybenzone, but I *had* heard of the coral reef crisis.

An article published this year by a group including Kyle Van Houtan, Director of Science at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, revealed that there is increasing concern over illegal sea turtle shell trade. In 100 years, an estimated 9 million sea turtles have been killed and traded. They write that this is significant, because "sea turtles are important grazers, maintaining the health of sea grass and coral reef ecosystems. Their population decline has likely altered ecosystem dynamics. Historical declines of sea turtles have reduced grazing rates by up to 800 times relative to today. At these scales, their removals have likely altered the structure and function of these important ecosystems across the world."¹ *Their removals have likely altered the structure and function of these important ecosystems around the world.*

The authors write that the destruction of ecosystems is reason enough for concern, but the concern is further reaching. This and other illegal fishing can be "associated with human rights abuses, wildlife trafficking, drug, weapon, and other illegal trade."²

This linkage between the exploitation of wildlife and the exploitation of humans and other illegal trade should not surprise us. Domestic violence research

¹ <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/3/eaav5948.full>

² <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/3/eaav5948.full>

has shown that often, those who are violent toward humans were first violent toward animals.

Last week, we were reminded of how human beings were created in equality for community. This week, we explore how human beings were created to care for creation.

In Genesis 1:26, God declares that He will make man. “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,” He says.

Throughout the centuries, the Christian community has had much to say about what it means to be made in the image of God, the *Imago Dei*. One definition is that we were made for relationship with God, because God is a relational Being. Having a “God-shaped hole” is a colloquial way of explaining this. Another definition is that human beings were created perfect, in the image of God. But, according to that definition, humanity lost that perfection, that image, in the Fall. Humans are no longer in the image of God. These are but two definitions. *God-shaped hole, no longer in the image of God.*

What is interesting, however, is that the image of God is *undefined* in Genesis. As commentator Gerhard von Rad wrote, “The text speaks less of the nature of God’s image than of its purpose.”³ Verse 26 says, “Let us make man in our *image*, after our likeness. And let them *rule* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” The author does not explain what it *means* to be created in the image of God, but that the *task* of being created in the image of God is to rule over

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, 59.

the animals. This task is echoed in Psalm 8 verses 5 – 8. “You have made [man] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have set him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.”

Sadly, Genesis 1:26 has frequently been used by Christians as license or even encouragement to *exploit* creation. And I can see why people might think that. The language is strong: made in the *image of God* to *rule* the animals, to *subdue* the earth. When we hear these words, we think of force and coercion. We think of a king.

And imagining a *king*, in fact, is helpful. When a king isn't present to his kingdom, he appoints a viceroy, or vice regent, to reign in the king's place. The king is gone, and the viceroy is in charge. The viceroy's responsibility is to imitate or to represent the king while he is away.⁴

Kyle Van Houtan, Director at the Monterrey Bay Aquarium, offers another example. Pacific Grove is home to the Monarch Butterfly Sanctuary. Monarch means “king,” and these “kings” migrate 3,000 miles, along the same path, every year. There is another butterfly that has the *image* of the monarch, but it doesn't migrate, and it is called a Viceroy Butterfly.⁵

Human beings were created in the image of God, to be His viceroys on earth. We were created to rule over creation as God would rule over creation. We were not created to rule through exploitation, but to rule as His only Son ruled. “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own

⁴ Kyle Van Houtan, Interview with Menlo Church, 2/24/19.

⁵ Van Houtan, 2/24/19.

advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:6 – 8).

Jesus, the Son of God, is our savior and our model. Like him, we were created to be servants, to be shepherds, “who [care] for, [tend], and [feed] the animals.” We were created to secure the “well-being of every other creature and [to bring] the promise of each to full fruition.”⁶ We were created to care for and to serve *all of creation*.

As American Christians, we recognize that the earth is broken, and we admit that it’s because of our sin. We recognize that we are the cause of the earth’s brokenness, yet this brokenness has become nearly irrelevant to many Christians. A popular notion called “evangelical Gnosticism” has infected our theology, with the belief that “God is lord of the spiritual realm...but is largely irrelevant to the ‘physical’ or ‘secular’ realms.”⁷

We rightly recognize that Jesus died to make us right with God, but we often stop there. We fail to recognize that we were *created* to care for the earth, and that Jesus has reconciled *all things* to God. Colossians 1:19 – 20 says, “For in [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to Himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood on the cross.” Through Jesus’ death, God reconciled *all things* to Himself. And one day, Jesus will

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, 32.

⁷ Steve Corbett and Brian Finkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 90.

restore *all things*, on earth as it is in heaven. One day, he will come to make *all things* new.

In the meantime, we are called to be viceroys, the image of God on earth, caring for His creation. What is God inviting *you* into, to care for His creation? I invite you to close your eyes and ask. What is it God is inviting you into to care for His creation? (pause) Is it to wait to update your gadget so that there is less e-waste? (pause) Is it to drive your car less or even to ride your bike as a mode of transportation? (pause) Is it to check how your seafood is sourced? (pause) Is it to plant a garden, or simply enjoy creation? (pause) Whatever He is inviting you into, pray that God would give you the encouragement to fulfill this calling. (pause) Amen.

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church: May you, may *we* be the image of God on earth, agents of God's reconciliation to *all things*. Amen.