

## “The Sacredness of Human Life & the Image of God”

Genesis 9:5-6

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, June 7, 2020 (Trinity Sunday)

### **Scripture Reading**

*“And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” (Genesis 9:5–6, ESV).*

*Heavenly Father, Almighty, and Everlasting God give us eyes to see what you see. Give us hearts that love what you love. Give us ears to hear your voice. And by your mercy, bring justice and peace to our broken world. In Jesus’s name, we pray, AMEN.*

### **Introduction**

As you can tell by the Scripture reading, we will not be returning to our journey through the New Testament epistle of 1 Peter quite yet. Instead, we will be taking yet another Spirit-led detour on this Sunday morning.

In the last few days and weeks, I have felt a growing sense of pastoral burden for our nation at this unique moment of time.

The death of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the chaotic aftermath that has ensued is one of the most socially significant events in living memory. The fact that this moment has occurred inside of a global pandemic and economic downturn, neither of which are resolved, is also significant.

In the truest sense of the world, we are witnessing ***an “apocalyptic” moment***. By the apocalyptic, I do not necessarily mean the end of days. The world “apocalypse” means a manifestation, a revealing, an *unveiling of reality* as it is.

This moment has been apocalyptic in that a veil has been lifted. And what we have seen beneath that veil is not pretty.

Beneath the veil, we have witnessed the enduring and deadly power of racism, abuse, and oppression. Beneath the veil, we have witnessed a pent-up rage and division that has overflowed into riots, anarchy, and deadly violence in many of our nation’s cities. Beneath the veil, we have witnessed the need for justice and the need for peace, and we have witnessed that we cannot have one without the other.

But as Christians, an additional question emerges. How do we interpret this unveiled, apocalyptic reality that is before us? And make no mistake; there are voices that are vying for your attention. There are voices that would have you view reality through the lens of their agenda.

So, as a Christian Pastor, I want to plead with you. Do not allow a cable news station to disciple you in how you interpret the world in this moment. Do not let your social media feed or an online forum feed you what to believe. Do not allow the talking points of a political platform or your own preferences to skew your vision.

Christians must learn to view reality through the lens of God's word. We must think through this moment, speak to this moment, and respond to this moment through a distinctly biblical and theological framework.

My hope is that most people who are watching and listening to this sermon have been grieved by what we have seen. I hope it has grieved you to watch an unarmed man be murdered by a police officer. I hope it has grieved you to watch American cities devolved into warzones of destruction and deadly violence. I hope it has grieved you to witness unashamed and venomous hatred applied to all law enforcement.

***Our local congregation includes both people of color and members of law enforcement who have been personally pained with what is going on around us. So, it is important and timely to look to God's word today for wisdom, direction, and hope.***

The title of my sermon today is *"The Sacredness of Human Life & the Image of God."* And we will work through this sermon by asking four questions.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) Why is human life sacred?**

Our reading today comes from the ninth chapter of the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis is the first book of the Bible, and its name literally means "the beginning."

The role of Genesis is to explain our beginnings. In Genesis, we see that the beginnings of this universe do not originate from mere chance and chaos. Rather, all of the cosmos derives from the intention and creative work of a personal creator God. We see that God's creation is good and that his crowning achievement is man and woman – who are made in the image of God. As image-bearers, man and woman are to enjoy, steward, and reign over God's good creation.

But Genesis also explains the beginnings of our suffering. Rather than submitting to God's gracious rule, man and woman chose to rebel against God. And in doing so, they fractured God's good creation and they cut themselves off from the very fountain of life and joy. When sin – when humanity's rebellion against God – entered the world, it

immediately began to unravel creation. In Genesis, we see how sin brought forth shame, murder, oppression, and war.

By the time of Genesis 9, the power of sin has caused unfathomable brokenness and destruction. Thus, in order to save humanity from destroying itself, God sent a flood to destroy humanity, with the exception of the family of one righteous man named Noah.

Now, at this point in the story, the floodwaters have subsided, and God is giving instructions to Noah and his family on how to live and continue God's original mission for humanity. And it is *here* that God directly sets up laws that are intended to protect the sacred reality that is human life.

Now, the first biblical reason the sacredness of human life derives from the fact that **God is alone the Creator and Lord of life**. Only One who possesses absolute authority over life can say, *"And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man" (Gen 9:5).*

Now, certainly, humans can "create" one sense by rearranging things in different ways. But most importantly, only God can author life. According to the Bible, all life is a miracle that only God performs. Thus, men and women are called to respect life as a mysterious and sacred act of God. Thus, as K.A. Mathews has written, *"To take human life unlawfully, therefore, is to usurp God's sovereignty over life and death."<sup>1</sup>*

The second biblical reason the sanctity of life relates more to the special nature of human life. Our text says, *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Gen 9:6).* In other words, **human life is sacred because it alone bears the *Imago Dei*** – the image of God.

***The biblical doctrine of the Image of God has shaped history, because it forms the most powerful, consistent, rational basis for human rights.*** Now, don't get me wrong. Secular people and atheistic people can believe that we should be kind and fair to one another, but it is the idea that people are created in the image and likeness of God that generates a sense of binding *obligation* that is deeper than whatever cultural fad is going on at the moment.

*Because of the Imago Dei, each and every man, woman, and child is worthy of dignity and honor, not because of their power or wealth or attractiveness, or what they can "contribute to society," but because they are imbued with worth by God.*

God is a personal God, and so we are to honor the personhood of all people. God is a holy God, and so we are to honor human life as holy and sacred.

## **2.) What does it mean to honor the sacredness of life as a society?**

---

<sup>1</sup> K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, vol. 1A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 405.

Flowing from the idea of the sacredness of human life found here in Genesis 9, the Bible will later give the famous Sixth Commandment of the Ten Commandments: ***“You shall not murder” (Ex 20:13).***

Now, this is something most Christians and non-Christians would agree on: murder is bad and human life is worth protecting. This concept is essential for civil society.

Indeed, the mark of a failed state or society is the widespread lack of the sanctity of life. A government that does not or cannot guard against random acts of murder is no government at all.

The late Christian ethicist John Murray once wrote, ***“Nothing shows the moral bankruptcy of a people or of a generation more than disregard for the sanctity of human life.”***<sup>2</sup> Few people would argue with him. But it would be a mistake to think that as long as we don’t go out and murder people, we are honoring the sacredness of human life. There is more that is required.

How we honor the sacredness of human life is revealed in how we treat those with disabilities, how we treat the elderly, how we treat the poor among us, how we treat the vulnerable and the alienated among us, how we treat the unborn; and it is revealed in the way we think about those who have a different skin color than our own.

We grieve George Floyd’s death because it is an abomination for an image-bearer of God to have a knee pressed onto his neck for nine minutes while he suffocates and pleads for his mother. This act was a desecration of the image of God.

Likewise, we feel a sense of righteous indignation and anger at the fact that, apparently, the man who held his knee to George Floyd’s neck did not expect that he would be held accountable for his actions, even as he was videoed. This action was a flagrant abuse of power that resulted in the death of a human life. And like that of Abel, George Floyd’s blood cries out from the ground (cf. Gen 4:9).

So, when such a horrific public act occurs, it is appropriate to call murder, “murder.” It is appropriate to call evil, “evil.” It is appropriate to call injustice, “injustice.” It is appropriate to have raw, honest, and uncomfortable conversations. It is even appropriate to feel a sense of righteous anger.

But as Christians, we must not sin in our anger. As Ephesians 4 says, ***“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph 4:25–27).***

When the image of God is dishonored, when violence is unleashed, when the sacredness of human life is violated, there is a powerful, visceral temptation to return evil for evil.

---

<sup>2</sup> Murray, John. *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 122.

But Christians must resist this temptation. We cannot honor the sacredness of human life by adding fuel to a cycle of violence and hate that dishonors the image of God.

Law enforcement officers bear the image of God as well. And to impute the sins of the men who took the life of George Floyd onto an entire profession is misguided, unhelpful, and sinful. *Hatred of fellow image-bearers based on their skin color or the badge they wear is out of step with the gospel.*

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*: *"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy, instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. ... Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."*<sup>3</sup>

Thus, when we see peaceful protests, we should see this as moment of understandable public grief and mourning. But when those protests turn into riots that result in further loss of human life, we should lament.

Now, I know people are full of pain and passion, but we must not channel that pain and passion into a force of destruction. Destruction is easy. Tearing down is easy. Cathartically venting and fomenting group rage is easy.

But channeling that pain and passion into building something new, creating a better future, helping people of different backgrounds and income and cultures flourish together – that takes wisdom from above. That takes leadership. That takes time, diligence, and a commitment to communication, organization, and institutional administration. It takes patience, consistency, endurance, and the willingness to do hard work when the hashtags go back to celebrities and reality shows.

The way of anarchy and destruction will not help George Floyd. But the hard task of working for better leadership, better organization, better policies, and better laws will help those who do not need to become the next George Floyd.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Judean exiles in the unbelieving city of Babylon: *"But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare"* (Jer 29:7).

So too, as elect exiles, Christians are to seek the peace of the city to which we have been sent. The Church has a role to help cultivate honor for the image of God in society. We have a role to be agents of God's *Shalom*.

After all, one of the features of Christ's redemptive accomplishment on the cross is that he broke down the walls that separate groups of people on the basis of ethnicity. As Paul

---

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*. (1967). 67.

writes to the Ephesian Church: *“Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility”* (Eph 2:11–14).

Thus, Christians should actively seek to make the church a place where this reality can be displayed to a watching world. For Christ did not just abolish the wall that separated Jew and Gentile. He separated the walls between brown, yellow, black, and white.

So, we must seek to cultivate a culture within the church that displays love for people of ethnicities. This means when the Bible tells us to forsake “filthy language” (Col 3:8), this means Christian churches and homes should be places where derogatory, racist language and jokes are not acceptable. This means when the Bible says we are not to show “partiality” (James 2:1;9), that we must not exclude people from friendship or community or business on the basis of race. When the Bible says to put away all “malice,” we must actively renounce speech and actions that stir contention and division and hatred. When the Bible tells us that a church of reconciled Jews and Gentiles is a declaration of “the manifold wisdom of God” (Eph 3:10), it means that we seek to not only believe in the reconciling power of the gospel – we try to display it.

This is why our church has regularly sought to worship our God alongside fellow Christians from difference churches and different cultural backgrounds [show image of the One in Christ service]. When the Church displays oneness in Christ, we are bearing witness to a reality that we believe is only possible in Christ.

There is a day coming when death and pain and racism and injustice will be no more. There is a day coming when all tears will be wiped away. New Creation is coming!

But we know we cannot bring about New Creation in our own strength. We cannot bring the kingdom of God in fullness. But we can bear witness to it, and we must bear witness to it. The Church must contend for our sphere of influence to be a place where the image of God is honored.

### **3.) What does it mean to honor the sacredness of life as individuals?**

If we are to take the biblical truths of the sacredness of human life and image of God serious, it means we examine our own hearts before the Holy Spirit. We ask how we have been co-conspirators in forming a culture of hatred, division, and systematic injustice. We recognize and repent of our own temptation toward bitterness and bias.

When we talk about the role of the individual, the Bible challenges us to dive beneath all of the social issues and structures that are so easy to externalize and to instead look deep into our own hearts.

## ***Honoring the sacredness of life begins in the heart – as does murder.***

Jesus himself shows that the sin of murder begins in the heart and can even happen through words. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus preaches: *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Mt 5:21-22).*

This means that if we are to truly honor the sacredness of life, we must avoid bitterness, hatred, and vengeance. Instead, we are to proactively pursue forgiveness and reconciliation; even when it costs us something. And true forgiveness almost always costs us something.

Now as a pastor, one of the most common things that I have to walk people through is not just the pain caused by the sins they commit, but rather the pain that is caused by sins committed against them. And one of the most important steps in this process is to encourage people to truly forgive those who have hurt them.

I often have to say that when you truly forgive someone, you are not saying that what that person did was right. You are not acting like it never happened. You are not rationalizing or minimizing how someone has sin against you. What you are saying is that you are choosing to no longer create your own justice by harboring bitterness and murder in your heart. Instead, you are entrusting your justice to the true and perfect judge.

In fact, I would argue, our ability to totally forgive derives, in part, from trusting in God’s perfect justice. If you think about it, when we hold onto bitterness and unforgiveness, we do so because we desire justice, we desire vindication, and we think we have to get justice for ourselves. But God invites us to let go of the poison of our bitterness. Why? Because he is a judge who is perfectly wise, perfectly good, perfectly merciful, and perfectly just. You can entrust your pain to him. You can rest in him. He will bring forth our justice like the dawn (cf. Ps 37:6-7). He will be your vindication.

Is there bitterness in your heart that you need to give to God? Who in your life do you need to forgive? This, too, is honoring the image of God.

### ***4.) How does the sanctity of life point us to the gospel?***

Our text says, *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.”*

Murder here is condemned as one of the most heinous and irreversible crimes that a person can commit. Therefore, God says, a price must be paid. However, in the context of the broader storyline of the Bible, there is a beautiful irony in these words. ***For though murderous bloodshed is evil and reprehensible, it is through the shed blood of God’s Son Jesus that redeeming grace would enter the world.***

God sent his only Son to enter our world of brokenness. He lived the righteous life we could never have lived. And he died the death we deserved. Apart from him, we are all murderers in our hearts. But his shed blood washes us anew so that we have new hearts. Our sin gave way to murder and death, but by the power of Jesus' cross and resurrection, the power of death has been swallowed by the power of new life.

And now, as a redeemed people, we are called to bear the new life of Christ to the world around us, by honoring the image of God in others even when it costs us personally. This is from 1 John 3: *"We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers"* (1 Jn 3:12–16).

### **Conclusion**

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people who hold sacred the gift of human life. May we be a people who honor the image of God in every man, woman, and child. May we put to death the practices and passions of murder in our hearts. May we do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God. And may we seek forgiveness and reconciliation with one another, for the name of the One who bled for our sake while we were still sinners and gave us new life (Rom 5:8).

AMEN.

### **Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities**

- 1. According to Gen. 9:5-7, why is human life to be considered sacred?*
- 2. What are several ways that we should seek to honor the sacredness of life as a society?*
- 3. How should we seek to honor the sacredness of life in our own hearts (see Matthew 5:21-22 and 1 John 3:15)?*
- 4. How does the idea of the sanctity of life relate to the cross of Jesus Christ?*