

Epiphany 4C
January 31, 2016
Sanctity of Life Sunday
“Handmade Imago Dei”
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 4:21-32

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion 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.”

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

(Genesis 1:26-27)

By his Word, God creates mankind, the crown of his creation. These creatures, unlike all the others, were not only given the breath of life, but were fashioned in God’s image. “In the image of God he created man, male and female he created them.”

We read a bit later (Gen. 2:7) that the way in which God created Adam was to *form* him from dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. The word “form” is the same word to describe the way a potter fashions a piece of earthenware. The words of Isaiah chapter 64 verse 8 come to mind when the prophet harkens back to this account and says, “But now, O LORD, you are our Father;

*we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.”*

Later (Gen. 2:21-22) God takes a rib from Adam and that rib he *made* into a woman. That Hebrew word translated *made* could also be translated “built.” It’s the same word to describe what Noah does when building the Ark. You remember he builds with extremely precise and specific measurements and standards.

Then we can look to the Psalms. The Psalmist says of God in Psalm 139:13 “For you formed my inward parts; you *knitted* me together in my mother’s womb.”

At every point in all of these verses of Scripture we see a remarkable picture of our Creator handcrafting with painstaking care human life. Each human life is no mere fabricated widget on the conveyor belt of an indifferent Divine factory, but as the Psalmist says once again in Psalm 139:14 – each human life is fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderfully made = Hebrew word *Palah*. It also means distinct, set apart, distinguished. And as the Psalmist considers the unique craftsmanship of his own life, the handmade Imago Dei that is his and each and every human life – he is left to do only one thing, PRAISE the Lord, his Creator.

Psalm 139:14

He says to the LORD, “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

*Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.”*

To see the distinguished beauty and sanctity of human life is to worship, not man, but the Creator himself. That’s what the Imago Dei is meant to do. It’s not about being anthropocentric and full of ourselves, but is actually Theocentric and full of praise for the One whose image we all bear.

Recently I put my hands on my first Bible, I mean the first proper study Bible. It's all worn out and tattered. I was looking through it and came to our Old Testament passage that we just read from Jeremiah chapter 1. And one verse was circled on the page. It's no wonder that I circled this particular verse.

I was an extremely insecure guy when I was coming up. I tried to fit into every clique in my high school. I was so desperate to be popular. I couldn't be pigeon holed at all. It was an every man, but I was actually a nobody. I didn't fit in any category. It was a pretty lonely and spiritually empty way to live when I look back on it.

But this verse, verse 5 of chapter 1 in Jeremiah caught my eye back in those days, and I circled it in my Bible. (page 627 in the Pew Bibles)

*Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you (my old NIV
Bible says, "I set you apart);
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."*

Now, of course, this is a word given to a particular person, that being Jeremiah, but on the strength of all these other verses I've shared, you can see that this fits a pattern. I think it's actually a verse that describes something about the character of the LORD. I, as an insecure and confused young man could take heart when reading this verse. This word to Jeremiah could be a word for me, at least in terms of the fact that before the LORD formed me in the womb, he knew me, and before I was born, the LORD had set me apart, consecrated me, perhaps not to be a prophet to the nations like Jeremiah, but indeed for a very specific purpose. Perhaps no one in my high school really knew me, but the LORD knew me,

and in fact, knew me before I was even conceived and formed in the womb.

And as you go on reading the passage, there's even more here about the character of the LORD and His love for the lives He has created. When Jeremiah is fearful about his particular purpose and his ability to fulfill it, the LORD tells him that He is not a creator who makes something and then abandons it to get on with life the way the Deists surmise. No, He knows His children, He gives them purpose, and He stays with them through life to fulfill their purpose.

vv. 6-8 - Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD."

This is wonderful and comforting news for Jeremiah and for all of us. To read this as an insecure youth, you bet I circled it. These words give security. They say, my life has value and purpose, indeed it has infinite value, because it is formed and fashioned by the hand of the LORD Himself and He is with me all the days of my handcrafted life to help me fulfill my calling.

Surely that was worthy of praise then and it's worthy of praise now!

Guess what! It's not just for me. All of this tells me that every human life I encounter is likewise handcrafted, known, and given purpose by God. I look to you and you and you and I must praise God, at least I should, for you are fearfully and wonderfully made.

But there's more.

I have a 2 ½ year old. So, that means that we've rearranged the stuff in our house and have moved a bunch of things up higher. Our Christmas tree this year had all the plush unbreakable ornaments all along the bottom and the nice fragile breakable ones up high. Why? Well, because a 2 ½ year old doesn't know or value those fragile and valuable items in the house. They grab hold of the wine glass or the piece of antique pottery and we move into slow motion as they drop it, and it breaks on the floor.

God's children, Adam and Eve, did not value the Handmade Imago Dei. They didn't handle it with care, and it was broken.

And this same fracture in the Imago Dei has run through every human being ever since and with it a turning from the breath of life and the inheritance of the wage of sin, that being death.

But what does a craftsman do? He doesn't just scrap the old and start over with a new version, a sort of Imago Dei 2.0.

No, this is handmade Imago Dei, and the Lord never forsakes those that He has so fearfully and wonderfully made. The purpose He has for us is still there, even though in our fractured sinful state, we cannot fulfill it.

So, what has He done?

What's the Gospel? Isn't it that God knows and loves His handcrafted children so much and desires so much for them to once again reflect his glory that He comes to their fractured and shattered world where they are dead because of their fractured and shattered Imago Dei, and says, "Right! I'm going to deal with this."

The Creator, the very Word by whom the first man and every man, woman, and child is made has come to re-craft and restore that Imago Dei.

Jesus, the New Adam, fully human and fully God, the true Image bearer of God, He loves the fractured, insecure, lost, hopeless, we sinful human beings with all His heart. We are infinitely valuable to Him. He loves you and me the way only a craftsman loves the very careful work of His hands. And if it's broken, He is willing to go to infinite lengths to bring it back to its proper glory, no matter what it costs Him.

And as He looks to the brokenness, it breaks Him as well.

That's what we see again and again, as Jesus dines with prostitutes and tax collectors, touches and heals the diseased, laments over Jerusalem, and of course raises the dead. His heart is breaking for them all.

Who can forget the scene at Bethany in John 11, when Jesus comes to the grave of his friend Lazarus? We read that He was "deeply moved" and that He "wept" over the death of His friend. We also read that He was "greatly troubled." That Greek word means He was disturbed and agitated, you might say infuriated at the death of Lazarus and by extension, all death!

Death is the consequence of the fractured Imago Dei, Jesus' enemy that He must destroy in order that the Imago Dei would be restored is death.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 15:21-26 –

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

When we look to the cross, we see just how much the LORD loves His handiwork, and in particular the crown of His creation, His handmade Imago Dei, human beings, every last one of them.

Brothers and Sisters, every day is a day that we should see the world and every person in this world as one known by God from before the beginning of time and given glorious purpose in His Divine economy. Every person is fearfully and wonderfully made by hand, the LORD's hand. Every person, yes, has sinned and gone astray and is fractured, and the wages of that sin for everyone is death. And Jesus has come as Savior for the whole world, every single person in the whole world.

That's how we should see the world and our fellow human beings every single day, but today we are making a point of seeing life, handcrafted life, as infinitely sacred. This is Sanctity of Life Sunday. We are joining with thousands of Christians across the nation to love and value every human life, even those unborn, for they are known and loved even before they are formed in the womb. According to the Bible in Jeremiah 1:5, life begins before conception.

This is also Stand Up Sunday, and we are joining with thousands of Christians across our state in remembering and mourning the murders of nine of our brothers and sisters in the shooting at

Mother Emmanuel Church last June, and like Jesus, we are to be deeply troubled by death and to see it as the enemy that it is and to act on behalf of those who have been murdered and to say “no more” to those who would seek to take the life of any human being at any stage.

And I know that there are some who would say that I am bringing politics into the pulpit by embracing Sanctity of Life Sunday and Stand Up Sunday – which highlight issues often placed on opposite ends of our political spectrum, those being abortion and the murderous use of guns.

I see neither of these as political, but as the same Biblical and Theological truth that all human Life is Sacred and death is the enemy. And as our Lord Jesus has shown us, we are not to sit idly by, but we are called to act. So, today we have offered a few ways to act. I know these actions aren’t everything, but they are something.

We’ve given you information about Anglicans for Life, which is “the global Anglican ministry that educates, equips, and engages the Anglican Church in fulfilling Scripture’s mandate to protect the vulnerable, defend the fatherless, and plead for the widow.”

Also, all of our loose offerings this Sunday will be donated to Anglicans for Life.

We are also giving everyone who chooses to do so an opportunity to Stand Up in memory and honor of those who lost their lives at Mother Emmanuel Church by signing letters to our state legislators asking them to pass legislation for thorough and completed background checks on *all* gun purchases — including those that occur online and at gun shows, this being an attempt not to focus on guns themselves per se, but on the people who would seek to acquire guns to use them for violent and murderous purposes.

I'm aware that these subjects evoke all kinds of emotions, perhaps pain, shame, fear, anger, misunderstanding. I think we're all going to feel a measure of discomfort today, and that's OK. If anyone needs to come and talk with me, or pray, I'm available. We can also arrange private prayer sessions with our prayer ministers for anyone who requests them.

But, please remember that our Lord is merciful and full of compassion. His grace is sufficient to cover all our sins. He loves every last one of us. Let us show that same grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ with one another and with every handmade bearer of the Imago Dei that we meet.

Amen.