Bethany Memorial Church

Bethany, West Virginia

Sharon E. Watkins

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The Family of God

Genesis 1:1-5, 26, 27, 31 – Mark 1:4-11

<https://www.facebook.com/bmcwv/videos/491181138514849>

I look at my phone way too many times in a day – news, Facebook, twitter, email... Probably not good for my mental health. Or – spiritual health.

One good thing about looking at my phone, though, is my wallpaper. The first image I see when I pick up my phone, is our little grandson, Caton, sitting at his play station. My heart melts, and I smile. Every. Single. time.

In the midst of political and social chaos, insurrection, pandemic, hate, that little face reminds me again of life, love, family, God.

Sometimes my mind goes farther. It’s not just my life and family. Seeing that little face reminds me that other people have faces like that in their lives as well, and I remember how connected we human beings are, not just my family, the whole human family. We all have people we love – complicated though those relationships may be sometimes.

In this time of intense division for our nation, I want to stay in touch with our human connections. I want to remember what we have in common as well as what drives us apart… I want to remember who we are.

Today’s scriptures give me a welcome point of reference. Like the picture on my phone, they ground me. They help me remember that a most basic thing we have in common is that we are each created in the image of God. Each and every one of us, made in the likeness of our divine creator.

The very first words of the Bible open with God moving over utter chaos and bringing forth order with a few simple words. “And God said, ‘let there be light,’ and there was light,” … “and God saw that the light was good.”

Day by day, God speaks more and more into being. Each day God calls it “good” until, on the sixth day, God creates human beings in God’s image. Then God looks over all of creation and calls it very good!

Flash forward to the gospel of Mark, the time of Jesus. People have forgotten their connectedness. Roman soldiers have marched into Judea and conquered the land. The people are oppressed. They long for liberation.

In the midst of this social and political chaos, John the Baptist shows up, a prophet. He calls people out into the wilderness where God’s people have often met God, and they come, hoards of them. He urges them to confess their sins, to be baptized in water, in preparation for the one God will send.

Into that disorderly scene, Jesus appears. If you were looking through a camera, Jesus would come into focus and all around him would blur.

“In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’”

In the midst of chaos and distress, Jesus appears! God speaks. And names Jesus as God’s beloved son. In this moment, Jesus knows who he is, and so do we. He is the son of God. It is very good!

For those of us viewing this drama, reading this gospel, this moment is not only about Jesus, although the focus is on him. This is also about us.

In the following verses and chapters of the gospel of Mark, Jesus will move into his active ministry. He will call disciples to follow him. They will also be baptized. They, too, will discover who they are: they are children of God, made in the image of God.

The disciples will participate with Jesus in ministries of love and compassion. They will heal people of illness and infirmity. They will cast out demons of fear and hate. They will sit at table with people who society says are their enemies, and instead will discover they are also children of God, made in God’s image, beloved family.

Jesus and his disciples are our family, models for us to follow as Jesus now calls us.

We are going through a difficult time as a nation right now. We are deeply divided about really important things. And let’s be clear. There is right and wrong here, though we may not all agree on which is which. Which is the problem. Some of us are finding that we are profoundly divided from people we truly love. It’s hard to know how to act with each other, what to say.

So we turn to the scriptures to help orient us in the chaos. There we see the image of Jesus, in the chaos of his day, revealed as the child of God, reminding us, that we, too, are children of God, made in God’s image. And so are our other human siblings, as well. All of them. An important point of reference in the chaos.

Lee Drutman, a political scientist, said to NYT columnist David Leonhart recently that it is “dehumanizing rhetoric” that “paves the way for taking violent action.”

His words made me think about the horror of the Rwanda genocide which some of us will remember. How one part of that nation took up arms indiscriminately against another, calling them “cockroaches.” See (unless you’re Hindu, perhaps) you can probably kill a cockroach and not think twice. A cockroach is not human. Once we dehumanize our opponent, we open the door for all kinds of unspeakable action. We have seen that this week.

But the creation story and the story of Jesus’ baptism, call us to see each other as family. They pave the way for Jesus to call us to love our enemy. To love them. They, too, are children of God, made in the image of God.

This is where it gets difficult, though. Loving each other does not mean giving each other a pass on bad behavior. People will have to be called to account for the violent and destructive actions the other day, and for planning it, and for supporting it. And will have to be stopped from planning more.

There are some things, as children of God, we have to resist. Some actions we have to say, “No,” to. There are some smell tests to help us determine bad from good. Is violence being encouraged? Then, ‘No.’ Are we being urged to think of each other as less than human? Followers of Jesus, cannot go there! Every human is created in the image of God. Connected as family. “… tied together into a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said. We are all connected.

One culture can’t feel superior to another. White Supremacy is sin. Nor can one economic grouping dominate another. Nor one sexual orientation or gender identity. We are all beloved children of God, and followers of Jesus are explicitly called to love each other.

Only by focusing on the image of God in every person will we finally find the way forward.

I like the approach of the new Poor People’s Campaign. It’s a faith-based organization led by Disciples minister, Bishop William Barber and Dr. Liz Theoharis. It brings people of different faiths, cultures, races, sexual orientation together to work for change that is fair and just for all. The Poor People’s Campaign believes that not only did God create us, each one, in God’s image, but God created enough for us all to thrive. When God said it is very good, God meant it’s good for all of us.

So one group does not need to dominate another. We can work together for the well-being of all. The Poor People’s Campaign says, when we lift from the bottom, all rise.

We’re all connected. One human family. All in the image of God.

I like the attitude I heard expressed in our BMC prayer group this past Thursday. We prayed with thanksgiving as the vaccine is being offered to some we know and love, but remembered also that the people of some countries in this world will wait two years to see the vaccine. People of those countries, too, have families, beloved faces they want to thrive. We need to pray with them, and act with them, and advocate for a more just production and distribution plan. Because we’re all connected. One human family. All in the image of God.

I like the story of the mom who sends her children off to school every morning, hands them their lunches and says, “Remember who you are.”

Remember who you are.

In the midst of last week’s chaos and the chaos likely still to come, I hope I will remember who I am, created by God in God’s own image. I hope every time I pick up my phone and see my grandson’s little face, I will remember that he and I and we are all connected. Each one of us, part of one whole human family. Called to follow Jesus, who rejected hate and violence. Who embraced hope and love.

Seeing that little face, being reminded of who I am, a child of God, I hope I will act like it.

And by my life give glory to God, creator, redeemer and friend.

As it was in the beginning is now and every shall be, world without end.

Pastoral Prayer

Sharon Watkins

January 10, 2021

Bethany Memorial Church; Bethany, WV

O God you are our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. We give you thanks and praise.

Thank you, that in a chaotic and even frightening week, you have been a very present help. Thank you for all the ways that people stepped up to be the visible sign of your presence, who have helped bring calm even as the nation has been in uproar.

We thank you for all who stood in line – against voter suppression – to vote, for all who have told the truth about free and fair outcomes. We ask your protection for all elected officials, and for all of us who will appropriately give voice to our opinions going forward.

We give thanks for people, who in the face of violent mobs, have offered calming prayer, offered a supportive arm to those needing assistance, courageously remembered to secure artifacts of governance, given protection even at the risk and even the cost of their own lives. We pray for the family of Officer Sicknick and those injured, those traumatized. For the families of all who lost their lives at the Capitol last week.

We pray for those blinded by hate, misled by ignorance and lies. Cause us all, we pray, to look deeply into ourselves, to repent of whatever we ought. Give us courage to remake our lives as you would have us do.

Be with all elected officials, as they determine what is right. Protect them and us from rash or selfish decisions based on fear or grievance. May each and all lead according to the common good. Guide president and vice president Donald and Mike; protect president-elect and vice president-elect Joe and Kamala, our senators and representatives, councilors and judges; mayor, Shirley, Chief, Micah, we pray.

O God, we continue to pray for all those impacted directly by the pandemic – those who are sick or whose families are, for Sandy; for those who are tending the ill at the risk of their own health – we praise you for their courage. Give them stamina, O God. Be with those losing jobs or businesses or who fear doing so. We pray for children and their long-term health, for students, especially Bethany seniors facing comps this week.

We pray for those receiving the vaccine and those in line, for those continuing to research and produce the vaccine, those who plan for its distribution, those who may not receive it for years. Do no let us settle for that long wait.

Dear God, quell the violence in these isolating times. Cure us of violence on the streets whether by citizens or police. Be with the family of Jacob Blake. Stay the hands of domestic abusers.

Be with each one we have named on our prayer list, dear God, and especially this day for Sarah and Vince whose fathers have died. Comfort them, we pray.

Help us in the midst of confusion to be still and know that you are God. Keep our eyes on Jesus that we will see the path you have laid for us. That the truth will shine forth, that you will be exalted among the nations, indeed in all the earth.

O God, you are our refuge and our strength; therefore, we will not fear. You are in the midst of us; we will take heart. In Jesus’ name, AMEN