God In Me

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Texts:
 Genesis 1:26-31
 Luke 24:113-35

Genesis 1: 26: God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness.... So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them ... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

So God asserts that men and women are made in God's likeness.

How can it be that we are "like" the transcendent God of the universe? How can it be that humans are "like" a God who is pure Love, pure good? What can the old story in Genesis mean when we know that the story of human evolution is more or less correct? Where is God's likeness in people who don't care and have "outgrown" God? Where is God's likeness in people who have done unspeakable evil? We struggle with these questions.

As a Christian, I believe the creation story of our Biblical faith invites us to be confident that God lives **at** the core and **in** the core of every person. God's image in us is our birthright. We are born accepted and deserving of the space we occupy and our role in God's story.

This is great good news.

I've been exposed to this doctrine, sometimes called "Original Blessing,” through my years at Church of the Saviour, but I've been relearning it and feeling it deepen in me over the past year.

I was raised on another interpretation of Scripture, the doctrine of "Original Sin," and if you come from most American or European Catholic or Protestant traditions you were, too. The doctrine, not of Original Blessing, but of Original Sin, has held sway as the dominant doctrine and teaching of churches descended from Rome, and the Reformation churches as well. I'm no theologian or historian, but the conviction of my original sin and unworthiness, and yours too, flavored my Baptist and Presbyterian Sunday Schools and my teaching at home from my parents. One of the dominant stories of the church I was brought up in was a kind of conditional faith. Jesus saves, but only if we follow the prescribed path to salvation. I heard stern and often uncompromising stories of sin and redemption. They were told by influential and powerful church fathers (and they were mostly fathers). They often served the church well or well enough.

Consider the story of Cain and Abel, the first children of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve had been expelled from the Garden of Eden because of their disobedience. Eve was punished by suffering in childbirth. But these first children must have surprised and delighted their parents. Likely they rejoiced in their innocent play and their developmental milestones. Cain and Abel grew into young men. Why did jealousy, rivalry, hatred grow? Why did Cain murder his brother? What grief this act must have brought to the parents, what feelings of guilt and responsibility. Eve would cry: “Is God still punishing me? Were these boys somehow tainted by my sin?” Adam would lament: “What did I do wrong? Where is God?” Thus, from the start, sin and sorrow was woven into the story of the human family. This story is only one of the many with which we must wrestle as we seek to understand the mysteries of human error.

One of the theological attempts to explain the ongoing saga of inevitable human wrong-doing is called Original Sin: We are born flawed. "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." And the wages of sin is death. We see this death confronting us right now, in climate degradation, in the nuclear peril, in the deathly lovelessness that seems to pervade the world out there. Other narratives, including "Survival of the Fittest" are equally grim.

Even when we try for Goodness, humans are confronted and often hoodwinked by evil's disguises. Evil succeeds by disguising itself as good. And one of the best disguises for evil is religion. Just pretend to love God correctly, go to church every Sunday, recite the creed, and say all the right things. Someone can be racist, a dyed-in-the-wool materialist, be against the poor, hate immigrants, and be totally concerned about making money, but still be "justified" in the eyes of religion. Remember what Jesus thought of the religious leaders of his time and how these leaders connived with their political bosses to kill him.

The biblical basis for the doctrine of Original Sin is generally found in Genesis Chapter 3, the story of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from the Garden, and in a line in Psalm 51:5, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me," and in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, 5:12-21 "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death came to all people, because all sinned."

Original Sin as church doctrine began to emerge in the third century, but only became fully formed with the fourth-century writings of St Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was the first author to use the phrase "original sin." Various subsequent church deliberations have made the doctrine official Roman Catholic church teaching, although the centuries have brought extensive discussion and elaboration, and the Protestant Reformation brought further interpretation.

Although you would be hard put to find much support for it in our foundation text, the Bible, the doctrine of Original Sin is deeply embedded in millennia of Christian thought. It has deeply influenced personal and individual religious thought and practice. It has deeply influenced political and social structures.

It is the dominant thread in current American Christian evangelicalism.

In Judaism and in Eastern Orthodox branches of the Christian Church, the doctrine of Original Sin is not a prominent feature, nor is it in Celtic Christianity.

I was first introduced to Celtic Christianity in 2021 through a series of Lenten Meditations prepared and presented to Eighth Day by our Inward Journey Mission Group. Celts were geographically and socially marginal to the imperial world of Rome, and the early Christian church there had the chance to develop outside the bounds of Roman imperialism and the doctrines of the imperially sanctioned church of Rome. A great Celt teacher tells us we must look for the flow of the divine deep within everything that has being. All creation, humans and the whole world, has been spoken into being by God — all creation carries God’s sacred essence in the core of its beings.. God is the sacred flow that runs through all things — the natural world and all living things — the Life that courses through the veins of the universe. And God has blessed God's creation and called it good.

Original Blessing is the great news of the gospel. It means that the trauma of eternal separation that haunted me as a child was only a false turn in my journey toward acknowledging the nearness of God, the God-in-me, the God-in-you, and the God in all creation.

I'm learning that you and I — North Americans of the twenty-first century — are called to broaden our perspective. We are called to open our eyes and hearts to an abundance of Christian traditions. We can learn to see God from vantage points other than our own, whether Native American, or African, or Asian, or Central American. I'm not suggesting that we abandon the insights of our own particular fathers and mothers in the Faith — far from it. But other insights and viewpoints can inform and enrich our own.

Our Christian faith story gives believers a path to salvation through Jesus, Immanuel, God-With-Us. God sharing our humanity to show us how to live, to tell us and show us that God requires justice and mercy, to show us that God loves us and delivers us from the bonds of death; to show us how to live as a community that listens and loves and forgives. In Jesus' life we are shown how to live, and in our own beloved community we see the Gospel life lived today.

The story in the Book of Acts of the Apostles is one of many we can look to to understand how varying perspectives can be respected and included. In Acts, Chapter 2, the Holy Spirit comes to — comes into — the disciples of Jesus, and then these disciples speak so that everybody understands them. People hear the Good News in their own language. Language and culture and nationality are no longer barriers. The Holy Spirit affirms the worthiness of each speaker and each listener. Each person assembled has the God-given right — the human right — to speak, to understand, and to be understood.

And, as it has been throughout human history, believers are subjected to lies about their freedom movement: They are called liars and disorderly drunks, and we know that some of them will be murdered because of their message. But Peter prophesies that, in God's kingdom, young and old, men and women, and especially the poor will speak their truth. God gives them the strength to withstand the persecution that comes with their prophetic stance.

Their faith is not an affirmation of a creed, an intellectual acceptance of God, or believing certain doctrines to be true or orthodox (although those things might well be good). Yet many Christians have whittled faith down to that. Such faith does not usually change our heart or the way we live. In fact, Americans are leaving traditional churches in droves because they find nothing that speaks to them. And tragically, large numbers who are staying in churches have adopted nationalism, materialism, and a certain kind of exclusionary traditionalism as God. But clearly, the quality that Jesus fully represents and calls us to requires Christians to move toward love and abide there.

Matthew Fox is the twentieth century theologian who coined the term "original blessing" and talked about "creation spirituality." Instead of sin and separation being the headline of the gospel, "original blessing" takes that priority position.

Far more than just being made in God's image, original blessing claims we are steadfastly held in relationship with God. Original blessing reminds us that God calls us good and beloved before we are anything else. Sin is not the heart of our nature; blessing is.

The Christian story is one that begins with ‘God-with-us” a reality that is present throughout the story.

One commentator (Shroyer) adds that original blessing means that we do not have to work "against" our human nature to live the life God has intended for us: "When we rest in original blessing, we recognize we are kept by God, seen by God, and given peace by God." It is God's sovereign choice to love his creation. "Original blessing means realizing your sin is not the most important thing about you, even if the world — or the church — makes you feel like it is."

The doctrine of original blessing acknowledges that the deepest level of our human nature is designed to hear God's voice and walk in his way. Sin is always beckoning us to go against our true nature and do the wrong thing. But sin is unnatural! If we persist in choosing sin, we will find the image of God increasingly obscured by the debris these sins leave behind. But these sins result from the wrong choices we make. They are not evidence of a totally depraved nature that naturally tends to choose evil options. We can counter the forces of fear and pessimism so prevalent throughout our society and most religion by a celebration of the goodness and the beauty in one another and in the created order.

Jesus is the one who demonstrates the essence of a beautiful life. This makes perfect sense: Service to others is one of the true splendors of creation. It is brought to fruition by God's grace in action.

The spiritual question is this: Does my life, does our community life, give evidence of a recognition of God-in-us? Does this indwelling bring about through us any of the things that Paul calls the "fruits of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self- control" (Galatians 5:22)? Are we any different from our surroundings, or do we reflect the dominant cultural values and biases of our own group? Do we learn by participating in our faith community, and strengthening the concrete practices, personal and community disciplines, the welcome, respect and appreciation of differences, the conversations and kind and thoughtful actions that change and deepen relationships. Do we pray? Are we learning to live our faith?

The incarnate Jesus is the pattern for our lives, a pattern that includes suffering and death along with love, joy, and resurrection. Most of us are very resistant to accepting suffering. So Jesus walked through it himself and said, "Follow me." He showed us that on the other side of suffering is transformation. Love is stronger than death. The full, vibrant life that Jesus offers is big enough to include even its opposite: death.

As our image of God changes, our image of God's creation, including ourselves, changes as well. We can stand in awe before the mysteries of galaxies that we will never fully comprehend. But Jesus came to show us what it looks like for God to be incarnate in you and me and our neighbor, to be right here. Jesus holds together the human and the divine and in this unity we experience blessing.

Amen

MORE MATTHEW FOX

From the very beginning, faith, hope, and love are planted deep within our nature—indeed they are our very nature as children of God (Romans 5:1-5, 8:14-17). Yet we have to awaken, allow, and advance this core identity by saying a conscious yes to it and drawing upon it as a reliable and Absolute Source.

Our "yes" to such implanted faith, hope, and love plays a crucial role in the divine equation. Human freedom matters. We matter. We have to choose to trust reality and even our physicality, which is finally to trust ourselves. How can people who do not trust themselves know how to trust anyone or anything at all? Trust, like love, is of one piece.

In the practical order, we find our Original Goodness, the image of God that we are, when we can discover and own the faith, hope, and love deeply planted within us: A trust in inner coherence itself. "It all means something!” (Faith) A trust that this coherence is positive and going somewhere good. (Hope) A trust that this coherence includes me and even defines me. (Love)

This is the soul's foundation. That we are capable of such trust and surrender is the objective basis for human goodness and holiness. It almost needs to be chosen again day-by-day, lest we slide toward cynicism, victim-playing and -making, or self-pity. No philosophy or government, no law or reason, can fully promise or offer us this attitude, but the gospel can and does. Healthy religion shares a compelling and attractive foundation for human goodness and dignity and shows us ways to build on that benevolent foundation.