

Thinking about the Image of God with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Genesis 1:26-28 (NIV)

26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

In 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave multiple versions of a sermon on "The American Dream". (The version quoted here, delivered on Independence Day, is found in the book *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr* by Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran.) Early in the sermon he drew his hearers' attention to these words from the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

He pointed to this statement as an articulation of a dream sustaining the idea of America. He went on to emphasize its universal reach:

It doesn't say "all white men," it says "all men," which includes black men. It does not say "all Gentiles," it says "all men," which includes Jews. It doesn't say "all Protestants," it says "all men," which includes Catholics. It doesn't even say "all theists and believers," it says "all men," which includes humanists and agnostics.

Where might this emphasis on the dignity of all kinds of human being find its basis? King notes that the basic rights of each person are "neither derived from nor conferred by the state" but are "God-given, gifts from his hands". In the end, King argues, this sweeping articulation of the dignity and worth of all human beings finds its roots in the Bible:

The whole concept of the imago dei, as it is expressed in Latin, the "image of God," is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man.

This means, King went on to argue, that the conflict over racial segregation in which he was involved was not about whether segregation was politically bad or economically harmful or a

problem to live with. The problem was that it was sinful because it turned those made in God's image into objects, things of lesser significance.

King goes on to describe how this applies not only to race, but to other distinctions commonly made between human beings, such as class, or poverty, or level of education, or type of employment. If all are made in God's image then their value does not depend on their income or their talent or their qualifications. If God has placed value in all human beings, then we can learn from the wisdom of others, even if they are not experts or those of high status. If we cannot acknowledge the worth of others simply as human beings, then our education has little value, he says. "You learn this and you discover the meaning of "God's image."

King emphasizes that this ideal of equal worth that is embedded in the American dream is not consistently realized in American society. How, then, can we bring about change? Not through violence, he argues, because violence is an expression of hate, which is a burden that we cannot bear, a force that twists our souls. He turns to a different way, one that involves cost and suffering but avoids hate:

Jesus is right, that love is the way. And this is why John said, "God is love," so that he who hates does not know God, but he who loves at that moment has the key that opens the door to the meaning of ultimate reality. So this morning there is so much that we have to offer to the world. ... I still have a dream this morning that truth will reign supreme and all of God's children will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. And when this day comes the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.

Questions for Discussion:

How does Martin Luther King, Jr. understand the "image of God" and its connection to the Declaration of Independence? Do you agree with how he makes that connection? Why or why not?

What strikes you as important in King's description of the image of God?

What important lessons does King's sermon suggest for how we interact with those are different from one another?