

John Docherty, 2013-08-04

... So God created humankind in his own image ... (Gen 1:27)

Since my position as pastor is an interim one that may only last a few months, I think I've been feeling some obligation to squeeze as much as possible into my messages. I've probably bitten off more than I can comfortably chew in some of my meditations, and this one is no exception.

What does it mean to be created in God's image?

To do justice to this question I feel like I have to actually try to answer 2 questions – What does it mean to be a creation of God, in a general sense; and then, what does it mean for us as humans to be created in God's image.

But to try to get to some answers, I'll be going around in circles a little bit. I'm going to begin with the second question : What does it mean for us as humans to be created in God's image?

The modern, intellectual, anthropologically oriented among us might be tempted to answer the question by suggesting that, in fact, we *haven't* been created in God's image – we have created God in *our* image. We have attributed to our creator very human characteristics – we have morphed an image of a transcendent God into a human image – an anthropomorphised image.

The ancient Greeks and Romans had very “human” gods, full of passions, flaws, and petty rivalries. Much like us. The Egyptian pharaohs, the Roman emperors, the Japanese emperors, were considered to be gods in the flesh. You can't get much more anthropomorphic than that.

So we do have a tendency to confer very human attributes on God. In Mary-Lou's children's time she made references to the non-physical ways we might resemble God : our capacity for love, our need for fellowship, our capacity for imagination and creative impulses, etc. These might all be characterised as us making God into *our* image.

But I don't think that equates to creating God in our own image. I think it's more of a reflection of a basic human desire to understand, and a very natural tendency to use imagery that is familiar.

For example, one of the unfortunate aspects of language is that it is limited. If we want to describe something, it *must* be done using terms and references that we are comfortable with. If we want to refer to God using pronouns, they have to be gendered, at least in English : he, she, or it. Our Scriptures and traditions, then, have overwhelmingly used masculine pronouns for God as a result. I don't have any real problem with that, apart from the obviously patriarchal overtones, except that it "genderizes" God in, I think, an inappropriate way. Throughout this message I've tried to avoid using pronouns for God – and it's pretty hard.

On another front, some would argue, with reasonable legitimacy, I think, that when Christianity expanded into western Europe it absorbed, and was influenced by, the dominant culture and its historical religious underpinnings.

The choice of important dates, for example, that curiously parallel ancient customs of Europe : Easter and Christmas that are roughly tied to the Spring and Winter solstices. Certain Saints' holy days, etc.

Some months ago, Bimal circulated a link to a very interesting youtube video of a short, 10 minute presentation by Wesley Ariarajah. In this presentation, he argues that once the Europeans had left their imprint on Christian thought, they basically decided that they had finally gotten a handle on complete Truth, and refused to allow any further influences to nuance their understanding of God as they expanded into other cultures.

He doesn't argue that they shouldn't have had an influence on understanding how God is at work in the world – God was, after all, at work in western Europe. He argues that they should have been attentive to what they might have learned about God's attributes when they expanded into Asia.

And by extension, I think he would also argue that Christians should have been attentive to how God was already at work in places like Africa and the New World, trying to understand the spirituality of their peoples and perhaps allowing it to

nance their own understanding of God, and the way they read Scripture, rather than assuming that they already had a complete picture.

My own thinking here has been stirred over the last few months by a comment Dorothy Proctor made during sharing time earlier this year. I forget exactly what she said, but it was something like : “It’s easy for native peoples to relate to God and the Holy Spirit - it’s in our DNA.”

... It’s in our DNA ...

I remember at the time being struck by this image of God being literally in our DNA, and it’s been haunting me ever since, stirring up all kinds of questions about creation and our position as children of the Creator.

We look for family resemblances in our own children; hints that something about us has been passed on :

- The shape of the mouth, nose, eyes
- Height
- Weight
- Hair, eye colour

My parents both had dark hair. Both had brown eyes. My mom was right handed, my father left handed. I was the first-born in the family – I’m red-haired (at least I was ...), have blue eyes, and am right handed.

My first sister was born dark haired, has brown eyes, and is right handed.

My second sister was born red-haired, has one brown eye and one blue eye, and is left handed – a total mix of our gene pool. My parents thankfully never had any other children ... I shudder to think what the next one might have looked like.

These physical attributes are very obvious expressions of the family relationship.

But there are also behavioural similarities that tie us together in our families :

- Our sense of humour
- Intelligence

- Body language
- Temper

We attribute much of this to our DNA. That is to say, to the DNA we've inherited from our parents. We, of course, are also nurtured by our parents and pick up some things through modelling what we observe, or are taught.

When I look in the mirror, it's my dad looking back at me. It's quite frightening, actually. The overhanging brow, the set of the mouth, the general build. Except for my nose – that's my mom's.

Behaviourally, I'm also a bit of a mix. My serious, stern side is largely my dad. My affectionate, playful side is largely my mom.

Now, I know this description of me as playful may take some of you somewhat by surprise. I've been told that my dominant "presence" is a stiff, frowning presence. People have told me many times that when they first met me they were sure I didn't like them because of this very stern look I have.

Here at MFM you at least catch glimpses of my playful side in those moments when I loosen the reins on my sense of humour during these meditations or at Arts Nights.

My family is more frequently subjected to this side of me, and my kids and grandkids will readily tell you that I can be annoying. To which I, of course, respond with the old chestnut that that's OK because the world needs more Noyings.

I can boast that I am the catalyst for 4 year old Elliott's first identifiable, meaningful words, other than mama, dada. He was, I think, almost a year old, and was at our house in the living room with his parents when I entered the room. He looked up at me, locked eyes, and there was no mistaking this ... said as clearly as anything : "Oh, oh!"

Things are so bad that a couple of months ago, when I was trying to get Elliott to stop doing something, I warned him that "Elliott, I'm serious!", to which he replied, smiling, "me too, I'm serious."

I can't help it. It's in my DNA. I joke that I'm a melancholy Scot, and there's some truth to that. I *do* have my serious side, and I struggle sometimes with depression like a lot of people.

But it is, I think, my sense of humour that often gives me the balance I need to put things in perspective.

Last summer, when Jason Kenny, the minister of immigration, cut health care to asylum seekers, I was gutted by the impact this had on RIVO's capacity to respond to a clear need for psychotherapy for traumatised individuals.

I was really bent out of shape about it when Mary-Lou and I left on our annual canoe trip. On the first night of the trip I had a dream.

I was at a conference or something here in Montreal, and I crossed paths with Jason Kenney. He had grown a beard, was looking very happy and relaxed, and caught my eye.

He came up to me, full of bonhomie, and said "John, just the man I was hoping to see! Look, I've been giving this whole Interim Federal Health Plan stuff a lot of thought and I've decided to make a slight shift to the left."

He then made a slight shift to the left, laughed and walked away.

True story.

I'm hard-wired to think like that. It's in my DNA. Is *this* how I'm like God? The son of a cosmic "inner child"?

In some ways I hope this is how I'm like God. I hope I'm more like God in these moments than when I'm angry, or impatient, or frustrated, or feeling vindictive.

"... so God created ..."

But how does God create in the first place, and how does God now sustain this creation?

One image of God as Creator, is that God created the cosmos out of nothing, established the laws of physics and biology that govern it, then stepped aside to let it run its course – the 'Deus ex machina' – the God outside the machine. A bit like

a clockmaker who builds the clockworks, synchronises the gears and balances, winds the spring and sets it ticking, with no further intervention.

Following this understanding of God's relationship to creation, God is distant, uninvolved in the day to day workings of life. A somewhat disinterested observer who will not interfere with what has been put into motion. A huge spring has been wound, and it needs to play itself out.

A different image of God as creator would have God creating, then maintaining a very intimate relationship with what has been created, stepping in from time to time to fine-tune, modify, ... to interfere with the clockworks.

This God has a very clear interest in our lives. This is not a disinterested 'Deus ex machina'. ***This*** God engages us in our prayers, and answers ... sometimes by intervening directly and tinkering with the laws of physics and biology to produce miracles – things that should not be, so far as our rational, scientific minds can tell.

If we even allow for the existence of God, I suppose these 2 images might be at opposite ends of the "intervention" spectrum, with perhaps some very nuanced understanding at various other points on that scale.

The 'Deus ex machina' is a tempting image for me in one respect at least. If God has simply created, established the laws of physics and biology, then walked away, I think it simplifies for me the dilemma of pain, suffering and evil to some extent. Things happen because they ***MUST***. There is no moral force at work that causes or prevents disaster. Floods will occur, landslides will happen, earthquakes will take place, fires will destroy and lives will be lost. But these are not value-ridden events.

It's up to us to deal with these events as best we can. The rain will fall on the just and the unjust and that's all there is to it. The challenge for us, then, is to figure out how to organise ourselves, take care of each other, put into place the infrastructure necessary to protect against the worst of the dangers and provide for the most vulnerable among us.

Or not.

We *do* have the option of embracing a Darwinian kind of mentality in which the strongest survive, and the weakest are culled from the herd ... or subjugated and put to work for the benefit of the strongest and “best”.

Either way, a ‘Deus ex machina’ God is not directly responsible for how we choose to live. Or for the suffering. God has given the cosmos rules to follow, and things simply take their course. Once all is said and done, and the spring has unwound, we may then be held accountable for the choices we’ve made, but in the meantime we’re on our own.

On the other end of the spectrum, the God who is intimately involved with the day to day functioning of things potentially presents us with a bit of a dilemma. *This* God may well be directly responsible for everything that happens, both good and bad.

Good things are a blessing. Bad things are a judgment, or a punishment. And this is true because God is all-powerful, omnipotent, able to intervene in any way at all, or to choose not to intervene. So whatever happens is God’s will.

The image of God we get in our Scriptures is closer to this image of God than to the ‘Deus ex machina’. The God of the Bible is actively involved in the lives of men and women.

And this God is held responsible for much that happens to the characters in our Bible : a flood that wipes out most of humanity is a direct judgment of God; plagues and mass deaths suffered by the Egyptians are the result of actions initiated by God; many of the things that happen to the Hebrews are seen to be a direct and clear message from God.

But God is not held responsible for *everything*. This God who creates and sustains is not held responsible for the actions of the created ones. The Hebrews (and we) are not puppets being manipulated by a Supreme puppeteer, or unwitting cogs in the intricate interaction of this cosmic clockworks.

They (and we) are free agents, capable of acting independently of their creator.

And this is where I start to struggle to understand our relationship to our Creator.

God has created this universe we inhabit. God has created us. God has created the materials in this pulpit.

Somehow, God *sustains* this physical existence. While it might be possible for me to take wood and varnish and nails and screws to build something like this pulpit, I am merely manipulating things that already exist to create something new. Once I have created this pulpit, it has an existence of its own, with no need for my ongoing involvement. Long after I'm dead, this pulpit can continue to do what it was intended to do.

I have a hard time picturing how God can create then step away.

Yes, this pulpit is made of wood. But this wood is made of elements like carbon, cellulose, and water; these elements are made of molecules; the molecules are made of atoms; the atoms are made of protons, neutrons, electrons; these sub-atomic particles are the building blocks of everything, and they're held together by energy.

I'm held together by energy. *You* are held together by energy.

If God, who has created the materials of this pulpit, and me and you – if God decides to step away and have nothing more to do with this creation, then I don't see how things can hold together. At the risk of sounding very “New Age”, if God is the energy that holds us all together, then God is very literally in our DNA.

I know I'm treading on very speculative ground here, but please bear with me.

I wonder whether Wesley Ariarajah didn't have something of this sort in mind when he suggested that Christianity should have been willing to consider the possibility that the Asians and the Africans and the Native Americans in their understanding of how God was present among them might have something to offer, in the same way that their European ancestry coloured their understanding of Scripture and God.

That perhaps these people who saw God in the natural world around them, who understood God to be vitally important to their well-being, who knew themselves to be intrinsically connected to the rest of creation, might have something to add to our reading of Scripture.

That they might perhaps have a lens through which we might better understand what it means to be a creation of God, and even more : created in God's image.

What if instead of seeing them as “animists”, as heathen savages bound to a satanic power, Christian leaders had been able to see them as fellow seekers after God with their own insight to the nature of God?

What if they had allowed themselves to be attentive to how God was already being revealed to them?

What if they had honestly examined the lives and faiths of these people to see what good could be incorporated into their own understanding of God, and sifted the good from the bad, rather than condemning wholesale everything that these people believed?

When the Bible says “... so God created humankind in his own image ...”, is it just possible that part of what this means is that we are each of us carrying in our cells the divine imprint shared with every other part of creation?

That the image of God we carry within us is not something that separates us from the other parts of creation, but rather something that joins us to them?

Is it too pantheistic to suggest that God is not out there somewhere, but right here? In you. In me. In this pulpit.

And yet ... and here is where I struggle intellectually ... as I said before, we are nonetheless free agents, capable of acting independently of our creator. We are not puppets, or part of some cosmic play. And this pulpit is not on a par with you or me.

We are not God. This pulpit is not God.

We are distinct, thinking, feeling, autonomous creatures who are called to be cognisant of our relationship to God. And, unlike the rest of creation, we are *aware* that we stand in relationship to the rest of creation and to God. We are aware of our mortality and wonder about eternity. Is this awareness how we are created in the image of God?

It's one of the mysteries that *I* struggle with.

In the same way that I stumble when I try to understand infinity, I stumble when I try to understand just how God sustains this creation. And I stumble when I try to understand God.

Where I don't stumble is in the conviction that God is there, or rather, here, and that God *does* sustain me and everything else.

In my attempt to present these thoughts in a more-or-less coherent fashion, I hope I haven't just confused you.

I hope I haven't just proven to you that I'm a hopeless mystic, or worse, a useless heretic.

I don't think I'm a heretic, and I know that I'm not really much of a mystic. I'm just trying to figure it all out.

And I trust God to be here with us as we try to figure it out together.