

“Words You Should Know: *Imago Dei*”

Matthew 25:34-40 • Genesis 1:26-31

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • July 10, 2022

This morning I want to return to our series on theological words we all need to know and understand and today we are learning about what's called *imago dei*. But before we get into the heart of this message, I want to begin by saying that this is potentially difficult for some people. First of all, it's in Latin—the theological word, not the whole sermon.

But more importantly, we are going to talk about life and death, including the sensitive topic of abortion, which can be a polarizing hot-button political issue. So let me assure you that this morning I'm not going to get into the political aspects of this topic. We're not going to condemn anyone and we're not going to talk about what *other* people should or shouldn't do. Instead, we're going to focus on the Bible and what God is calling *us* to think and do. Let me add that you are free to disagree with me. One of the foundational principals of Presbyterianism is what's called the “right of private judgment.” What that means is simply that *you* have an obligation to look at the evidence of Scripture and make up your own mind and none of us can tell you what you have to think.

As I'm sure you all know by now, a couple of weeks ago the Supreme Court issued a ruling that overturned the controversial 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision that decreed that the constitution provided a “right” to abortions nationwide. As I said, I'm not going to talk about the politics of the decision or even of abortion. Instead, I want us to think theologically about life and death and why we value life. As you know, several years ago as a church we wrote down the core values of our church, those things that we consider to be so important to who we are as a congregation that without them we would not be the same church. One of the things you said is that we value life.

Over the last few years there has been a lot of discussion in our culture about whose lives matter. Actually, I don't think discussion is the

right word – more like a lot of shouting. Let me ask you – what determines a person's value? That's really what the argument is about. How do we determine someone's value? Is it money? Is it their usefulness to others? Is it their unique abilities or the kind of job they hold or where they live? Is a person's value based on their gender or skin color or body size? Most of us would say no, a person's value is not based on any of those things. But we're still left with the question. How do we determine someone's value? The problem, though, is in the question. You see, the problem is when we believe that a majority of the population is able to decide the value of other human beings. That's how we end up with genocide or the German holocaust or slavery or legalized abortion and euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide.

One of God's purposes for the Church – and I'm talking about the whole Church, not just our congregation – one of the reasons the Church exists is to be the presence of Jesus and to offer an alternative to a decaying culture. Jesus said we are to be like salt, which acts as a preservative. The Church is often called to be counter-cultural. To a culture that doesn't value life, a culture that tries to determine a person's value based on all kinds of things, many of which are beyond the individual's control, to a culture of death we stand up and say, “your life matters.” Here's why.

All humans matter, every person is valuable, because they are made in the image of God. Right there in the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 1, we read, “So God created man (humans) in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” That means that every person has inherent dignity. Russell Moore wrote that human dignity is really a spiritual issue. He said, “It's a spiritual issue because the gospel grounds human dignity in Jesus Christ himself. In Christ, God has forever joined deity with flesh. Jesus did

not merely become human once; he is human to this day, and God's purposes in Christ center on the humanity which bears the Creator's divine image. To deny human dignity, then, is to deny Christ himself."

All humans are valuable simply because they're human. To be human is to be created in the image of God, which is what today's word—*imago dei*—means. Turn to the person next to you and say, "You are made in the image of God and you are valuable."

I want to share with you the way one commentator puts this value into perspective. He says the even if "you could travel a hundred times the speed of light, past countless yellow-orange stars, to the edge of the galaxy and swoop down to the fiery glow located a few hundred light-years below the plane of the Milky Way, [even if] you could slow to examine the host of hot young stars luminous among the gas and dust, [even if] you could observe, close-up, the protostars poised to burst forth from their dusty cocoons, [even if] you could witness a star's birth, in all your stellar journeys you would never see anything equal to the birth and wonder of a human being. For a tiny baby girl or boy is the apex of God's creation! But the greatest wonder of all is that the child is created in the image of God, the *Imago Deo*.

Because every human bears the image of God, because every soul is eternal, because we carry some of God's nature in us, God forbids taking an innocent life. One of the Ten Commandments is "You shall not murder." As a church, when we say we value life we are saying that we are opposed to the taking of innocent human life. The question, then, becomes "who qualifies as a human?" We believe that the Church has a responsibility to protect those who are most vulnerable in society, especially the preborn and those nearing the end of life. Scientists have clearly shown us that life begins at the moment of conception. At that very moment there is a distinct human life with a distinct DNA. In less than three weeks the baby's heart, brain, spinal column, and nervous

system are almost complete and by the 24th day her heart begins to beat. From the moment of conception a unique human created in the image of God is developing and needs only oxygen, water, and nutrients to grow.

Remember, we already said that body size does not determine a person's value. So we have to ask ourselves, "on what basis can we say that that child, that human bearing the image of God, has less value than someone else?" Yet that's exactly what has happened to nearly a million children in our country every year for the last 49 years.

Now if every human life is valuable to God, if God is concerned about every person, then it naturally follows that you and I should be concerned as well. What matters to God should matter to us. This is what Jesus was saying in Matthew 25. God is concerned about the hungry and thirsty, the lonely, those without enough clothing, the sick, and those in prison. Jesus says that when you and I care for those that our culture has decided have less value – he refers to them as "the least of these my brothers" – we are actually caring for Jesus himself.

The point is that valuing life, calling ourselves "pro-life," is not simply a belief or a philosophical idea that you agree to, or a political platform. What Jesus is telling us that valuing life is going to cost us something. Jesus said the most important commandment is to love God fully and to love other people. God calls all of us to love people the way He loves us – sacrificially. If we really value life we need to be active in valuing and loving people. If the Church is called to work to protect the most vulnerable, people who can't protect themselves, what can we do? Let me tell you there's plenty we can do. The most important thing we can do is pray. God hears the prayers of His people and responds. Pray that people's eyes would be opened to what's really at stake. Pray that women who are pregnant and those who care for the elderly and those who feel they have no hope left would realize that life is precious and that all lives matter. And pray for those who

struggle with past decisions. Pray that they would experience the loving forgiveness of Jesus.

But there's more we can do. The Pregnancy Center serves women who have an unplanned pregnancy. They provide ultrasounds so they can see their baby. They provide parenting classes and diapers and other baby supplies (that we just finished collecting), and they provide counseling. And the need is great. One of the ways we can promote life is to do as Jesus commanded us. We can serve by meeting the needs of the women and families who come to the pregnancy center. And we can help other people understand the importance of standing up for life.

Mission 911 serves people who are homeless or in poverty. People who are homeless are often considered "worthless" by society. But they are created in the image of God and are valuable. We can work to restore dignity to people who

are at the margins by building relationships with them. As Jesus said, "as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

Finally, there are endless opportunities to love and serve and value the lives of other people. Some of our oldest members live alone or in nursing homes and often feel forgotten. Valuing life means taking the time to visit with them and love them. God calls us to be the presence of Jesus in their lives because they are just as valuable to God. Valuing life means helping and encouraging new mothers. Every one of us can put our faith into action by valuing others. Let me conclude by suggesting that if you would like to help your church to value life more actively, please consider participating on the Serving or Connecting Committees.

Amen.