

Ish to Your Ishah

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

One of my favorite church historians and theologians is Justo Gonzalez. I first read his work in seminary and I return to it over and over again. Today, I rely very heavily on his book, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*, particularly on the chapter, “On Being Human.” Incidentally, if you are interested in theology, this is a truly excellent book and I highly recommend it.

In this chapter, Gonzalez provides an interpretation of our Old Testament reading for today. Like most creation stories, it shows us what humans are, at our core. He points out what I said in our children’s message—that humanity is made for relationship.

But God doesn’t stop by giving Adam the companionship of birds and animals. God sees that the animals aren’t quite enough for Adam and so God creates woman. As Gonzalez explains, this part of the story has led to some seriously problematic interpretations that are sexist and, I would add, heteronormative. So I’m going to take a minute to share his interpretation of this section. God says that Adam needs a “helper as his partner.” Gonzalez points out that the word “helper” here is the same one used throughout scripture to describe God as the “helper” of Israel. So this word, “helper” is not meant to be subordinate or secondary

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to a man who guides the family. This “helper” is like God, a strong, loving partner.

Secondly, what our Bible translates as “partner,” and others translate as “fit for him,” can more literally be translated as “in front of him,” or someone who is a mirror image of him. So what God seems to be saying here is that humans need a counterpart, a mirror image, not a subordinate being. And, having said that, God creates woman.

When Adam sees woman, he recognizes her as a direct counterpart—“bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”—a mirror image, he says, of me. This is stressed by the name he gives her-- his same name, but in feminine form. The word, “male” in Hebrew is “ish” and the word “female” is “ishah.” Gonzalez points out that now both the man and the woman are “good” because they have a mirror image fit for one another: “To be fully human is to be for others, and therefore God’s human creature is not complete until there is another to be for,” says Gonzalez.¹

Here, Gonzalez makes an important note that I will add to. This section of scripture has been interpreted to mean that every human needs to be married and, I will add, specifically in a heterosexual marriage. If this interpretation were correct, then we would have to say that Jesus was not fully human because he was not married (as far as we know). No, Jesus gives us an excellent

¹ Gonzalez, 133.

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example of how we can be for others without being married. Like many, if not most parts of scripture, this story is meant to be understood as a metaphor, explaining the core nature of humans—that we are meant to be in loving relationship with others and, in fact, that our very nature is being-for-others. The loving relationships can be with friends, extended family, or church members, and it can be homosexual, pansexual, heterosexual. The point is that we are made for loving relationships.

Now that this mirror-image couple has one another, their role is to be stewards of the rest of creation, the birds and animals, the trees and all plant-life, the earth itself. As our reading from the book of Hebrews explains, all of the earth is part of human control. But we are to use that power as Jesus used power, which means we might better translate the word “control” as “responsibility.” According to the creation story that comes before the one we read for today, God created humanity in God’s image, breathing God’s very own breath into us. That means that we are to do our best to behave like God, loving and caring for this earth and all of earth’s people, with whom we are in relationship. God uses God’s power in a self-giving, even self-sacrificial way, as we see through the life and death of Jesus.

After the part of the creation story that we heard today, we see that the couple eat of the tree of good and evil, thus learning how to sin. It is only at this point, Gonzalez notes, that man starts to dominate over his wife. He even renames her, “Eve,” no longer

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sharing his name with her or seeing her as his counterpart. In doing so, Gonzalez says, Adam alienates himself from her and other humans. He dehumanizes himself because he no longer has a partner, a counterpart, and because he seeks to dominate over others. Likewise, Adam starts to use the earth for his own ends, instead of seeing it as a part of himself that he must care for. This loss of relationship with one another and with the earth is the beginning of sin.

We can see the results of this loss of being-for-others, of loving relationship in how we currently use and abuse the earth, and one another. One of the most horrible examples of our loss of seeing other humans as our counterparts, is the history of racism in the United States. We can see it in the fact that, hundreds of years ago, the Christian church supported the creation of chattel slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow era, which specifically denied the rights of black people and placed white people in dominion over them. We can see it in the ways that slavery and Jim Crow have affected our relationship with people of color now, for example, in the way that people of color struggle to get mortgages, in the pay gap between white people and people of color, in the way that children of color are punished more harshly in schools for the same behavior in white children.

We can see our broken relationships with people of color right here in Grand Ledge. I know a parent who, a few years ago, had to stop sending the foreign exchange students living with her on the

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bus in Grand Ledge because they were being harassed so severely. More recently, people go to the school board meetings, so angry that their children might be learning about the true history of racism that they literally shout at the schoolboard and disrupt every meeting. And someone else I know just passed by a man in Meijer last week wearing a confederate flag face mask, a symbol of hatred that tells any person of color he sees that he believes that they are less than him.

As painful as it is to know, overt, as well as unintentional and subconscious racism are alive and well in our community. Racism dehumanizes people of color, but it also dehumanizes white people. So our very being, our being-for-otherness, cries out in us to change it, to go back to how we were originally created, as seeing others as our mirror-image, our counterparts.

I wonder how many of us can look into the face of a person of color—into the faces of all people of color--and see them as our loving partner and counterpart, the ish to our ishah?

If you cannot do that yet, it's time for antiracist work. Knowing that the pandemic, in particular, has negatively affected people of color even more, much more, than it has affected white people. It is time. As you know, our church has joined four other churches and the group Grand Ledge United to discuss a book about race. Our group meets tomorrow night here at the church at 6:30. We have copies of the book and you don't have to have read anything to attend the first meeting. It's far, far more important that you attend,

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than you keep up with the reading. It's also okay if you just show up without signing up. Please also know that you could attend other groups if you cannot make ours—Trinity Episcopal meets right after our worship at their church. Emmanuel Lutheran is meeting on Zoom on Wednesdays at 10:30, First United Methodist is meeting on Tuesday evenings at 6:30 at their church, and Jon Horford is leading a group at the library on Thursday nights at 6. I'll send out the information again in an email after worship today.

Coming to a book discussion may seem like a small step, maybe like a useless step, but I cannot stress enough how important of a step it is. The book our community has chosen to read is written by a person of color, so we will get to read about the perspective of someone who we might not normally hear from. This alone will open our eyes and help us to connect even more deeply with people of color. Moreover, attending a book discussion is a way to learn from others, since we all interpret what we read a little differently, and a way to form a deeper fellowship with one another. More importantly, it's a way to hold ourselves accountable for dismantling racism.

Most, if not all of you, identify as white. It's easy, as white people, to put off these discussions. Life is difficult right now and, frankly, talking about race is hard. It makes us uncomfortable, often causing guilt, sadness, and even anger. Many of us don't feel like we want to deal with those emotions, and certainly right now.

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But, my dear ones, we follow a savior who was crucified. Being a Christian was never going to be easy.

One of our most important tasks in the world right now is to restore our relationship with people of color, to see them as our own mirror image and to be seen as theirs. Now is the time to start, or restart, that work. Blessedly, we are bolstered by the good news of scripture. Our same savior who was crucified, conquered sin and death and was resurrected. Thus, everything he taught, everything he was, was vindicated, showing us that the path of love, no matter how difficult, is the path we should walk.

And that's why we read and re-read our creation stories. They remind us of who we really are, at our core, and how we are meant to be. We are ensouled bodies, made from the dust of the earth and the breath of God and connected to all of creation, like a web. That connection gives us power, allowing us to make a positive impact on our world. This means that we can form new relationships with one another, learning more about racism, so we can change the systems that harm our siblings of color. As hard as it might seem to reverse hundreds of years of structural racism, our very essence cries out for those reversals.

Beloved ones, Christ knows that we, as humans, make mistakes and that we even inherit mistakes from those who came before us. Christ also knows that, since we are made for loving relationship, our hearts pull us towards that love. So Jesus forgives us, but also shows us a path forward, filling us with a desire to

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come back into true mirror-image partnerships with one another.

Thanks be to God.