

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Genesis of Our Faith
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Genesis 1:26-31; Galatians 3:23-29

It is considered one of the greatest aspirational sentences ever written. *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."* This sentence is at the heart of the Declaration of Independence of the American colonies and is perhaps one of the most quoted lines from any document in the history of our nation. But as I said, it is aspirational, meaning the desire for equality is one to which this nation has always aspired but never fully lived into. This is not a criticism of our nation. It is not a criticism because there is no nation, organization or culture that has made this kind of equality a reality. What I mean by this is that if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that even if it is an oxymoron, there are some people who are more equal than others. Some people are more equal because of the families into which they were born, or the nation in which they were born, or the schools they can attend, or the experiences they can have, or their gender, sexual orientation, abilities, or skin color. There are countless life circumstances that prevent the aspiration of equality from becoming a reality...not only in the nation but in the church.

I say not only in the nation but in the church because the church also has an aspirational statement about equality in its founding documents. This statement is not simply found in Paul's words to the churches in Galatia but in some ways is hardwired into our faith through the words we read this morning in Genesis 1. I say hardwired because these words calling God's people to equality cover all aspects of human life. Let's take a few minutes and see how Genesis 1 calls us to three distinct aspects of equality: the aspects of **personhood, purpose, and provision.**

The first aspect of equality concerns personhood. Listen again to verse 26. *"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.'"* At the heart of this verse is the word "**adama,**" which is Hebrew for humankind. It is a genderless noun describing the totality of human beings. It does not describe a man or a woman. And even though the passage continues by differentiating man and woman, the initial act of creation is focused on reminding God's people that all human beings are equal because they are made in God's image. Thus, there is equality in personhood, meaning that even when the world wants to claim that some people are more equal than others, God's word shouts from the rooftops that this is not so; that every person is created in the likeness and image of God and so is to be treated as such.

The second aspect of equality concerns purpose. Genesis continues, *"...and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."* In essence

what this portion of the verse tells us is that we all have the same purpose in life, and that is to care for and watch over God's creation. I realize that the words "*have dominion over*" have been taken to mean domination, or the freedom to do whatever we want with God's good creation. It has meant that humans have the ability to pollute the air and water, and to deforest the planet. The problem with that interpretation is that it forgets that to have dominion means to serve the one who created and owns creation. In other words, to have dominion means to steward this amazing world as if God were here personally overseeing everything. I like to think of having dominion as being a forest ranger, whose task it is to care for and nurture creation. Thus, every human being is equally responsible for acting on God's behalf to care for the world and everyone and everything in it.

The third aspect of equality concerns provision. In verse 29 God says, "*See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.*" What this means is that all of creation and the goods in it are given to all people and not only to a select few. Of the three declarations of equality this is perhaps the most difficult to attain because human beings have long lived with the sense that what's mine is mine, and what's yours is mine if I can take it from you. From the dawn of creation, human beings have lived with a mentality of scarcity, meaning that enough is never enough and so I need to keep taking for myself, my family, my people, my nation even when that taking impoverished others. Consider that the wealthiest 16% of the world's population consume 80% of the natural resources. Or in this moment of Covid19, our nation is at a place where there are more than enough doses for all, and other portions of the world don't have enough to vaccinate more than a percentage or two of their population. What Genesis makes clear is that this is not the way the world is supposed to be. There is to be equality in provision because the goods of this world belong to all humankind.

Where then does the call to live into these three aspects of equality leave us? And by leave us, I mean where does it leave the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Michigan, Everybody's Church? Where I believe it leaves us is that we are aspiring to be a community in which this Godly equality is not only aspired to but is being lived out. This equality can be found in our Inclusion Statement, "*As Everybody's Church we strive to be a faithful, open and inclusive community. We welcome the full participation of all people of any ability, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other life circumstance.*" This equality can be found in our attempts to make our building energy efficient so as to minimize our impact on creation. This equality can be found in our mission work of sharing our resources with others. We are aspiring and working toward equality. The challenge I want to offer you this morning is this, to ask yourselves, "How am I working to make this world a place of equality in all that I do?"