

The Image of God and the Myth of Wholeness

In the book of Genesis,

there are actually two separate accounts of God's creation of humankind.

I want to read portions of each of those accounts,

and let their imagery serve as the ground of our meditation.

Genesis 1:26-27; 2:4-9, 15-17

I want to say a few words tonight about *the myth of wholeness*.

This may seem a strange and even self-defeating topic,

given that we are gathered tonight for a Service of Healing and Wholeness.

But at a service such as this one, in a culture such as ours

it is important to be as clear about what we do not mean by our prayers

as what we do mean.

And opening our eyes to the myth of wholeness can only be self-defeating

if we insist on imagining ourselves to be more than we were created to be.

I borrow this phrase "the myth of wholeness" from a book by Craig Barnes

entitled *Yearning*,

in which the author contemplates the Christian life as one in which

we perpetually find ourselves "living between how it is and how it ought to be,"

between our hopes and dreams and our reality.

Barnes argues that the hope of the Christian gospel

arises out of the hard truth about how things are.

He warns us that the gospel does not offer simplistic reassurances,

nor does it vanquish the hard realities of life.

We should not think that if we just work hard enough, and pray hard enough,

that if we somehow manage to do the Christian faith just right,

we will find the secret to living whole and healthy and fulfilling lives.

It's no surprise that we should think this way
given all the promises of wholeness on offer these days.

We are fractured and torn in countless ways –
our bodies break down, our relationships become broken and unfulfilling,
our work becomes passionless,
even our churches seem, at times, to demand more than they offer.

It is no wonder that we all yearn for the wholeness that is peddled to us
in any number of forms:
it is offered through psychotherapy, or the latest miracle diets,
or the promise of the next medical solution to the hindrance of growing old,
or any number of trendy new age philosophies and techniques.

But the Christian faith, Barnes insists, does not offer such solutions to our brokenness.
Instead, the promise of scripture, and ultimately the promise of the cross of Christ,
is that God will enter into our brokenness and meet us there,
and that it is only in the midst of our brokenness
that we can truly learn who God is and who we are.

It is only in the midst of our brokenness
that we can begin to find fellowship with God
who alone is whole and complete.

This picture of humanity is rooted in the story of Creation in Genesis,
which teaches us that we are created in the image of God.

To be created in the image of God
is not to say that we are created to be perfectly whole, complete, and self-fulfilled,
but that we are created with a built-in need, a built-in yearning for God;
as Augustine expressed it:
our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

Even in the Garden of Eden,

there was in the midst of the garden a tree
from which the man and woman were not permitted to eat the fruit.

To eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

was to strive to be more than human;
it was to try to be like God, as the serpent promised them they could be.

In contrast, to be truly human is to live in constant need of God;

it is to recognize and confess our limitations,
that we cannot attain all that we desire.

The good news of this biblical truth is that

in accepting the limits of being human
we are able to find fellowship with God.

In learning to live as no more, and no less, than God's creatures,

we are truly able to worship and be fulfilled in our Creator.

This does not mean that all our need will be erased,

nor that life's hard realities will become easy,
nor that we will somehow be spared the suffering that life inevitably brings.

It does mean that in the midst of our need, our difficulties, and our suffering

our deepest satisfaction is to be found in the presence of God.

So then, why do we pray for healing and wholeness?

In the act of prayer,

we unlearn the lessons of self-sufficiency,
and we re-learn our need of God.

In the act of prayer,

we expose the myth of achievable human wholeness in this life,
and rest in our dependence upon God who alone is whole.

In the act of prayer,

we see through the lies of a world that tells us we can have it all,
and rediscover the truth of our humanity, our creatureliness –

that we were created to live in relationship with God,
and that, no matter what our deprivation,
the grace of God is all we need.

To live in this way is to live in the image of God;
it is to live well – in the deepest sense.

So, let us pray and seek the healing and wholeness of God's eternal presence.