

Genesis 1 and 2 introduce us to God's story of humanity. We need to hear this story because, as we've seen over the past couple of weeks, we are constantly being told stories of who we are. Like the so-called ugly duckling, we are swans living in a culture that tries to convince us we're nothing more than ugly ducks. We need to cling to the story of Genesis: that we are created in God's image to live like Jesus.

Last week we explored a particular false story our culture tries to sell us: the story of individualism. We learned that God designed us to thrive not on our own, but in a community. We need each other to bear the full image of God.

Today, we're going to explore another false story woven into the fabric of our culture, one that creeps into how we try to follow Jesus, how we try to become more whole. In fact, it's a story that rears its ugly head particularly when we get into community with other people.

The end result is comparison and defeatism. Particularly when we start to take community seriously, we end up in relationships with people who are *better* than we are. Maybe they know more scripture or don't sound stupid when they pray out loud. Maybe they have really good insights into discussions or they say what you're thinking better than you could. Maybe they're really disciplined - they have a regular devotional time or keep Sabbath or have better kids. Maybe it's not even anything spiritual. Maybe they're funnier or in better shape or whatever.

Whatever the 'thing' is, I know how your story goes because it's how my story goes: you hang out with that guy a couple of times and you wonder, How does he do it? And you find out - either because you ask or from conversation. They tell you, Oh I get up at 5 every day and spend two hours in prayer and reading the bible before I go run 10 miles then make breakfast for the family and drive the kids to school after I walk my dog.

And you think in your head, Oh, I can try that. I just need to _____. And then you fill in the blank with however your life doesn't look like his. Maybe it's getting up two hours earlier. Or exercise. Or whatever. You try to take his formula and fit your life inside it.

But you know what happens next: it doesn't work. It might work for a week or two, but sooner or later, you just can't keep doing it. You can't keep up his routine. So you slide back into the life you were living, bringing with you a new sense of defeat and failure because you *tried* to be better and you didn't make it.

Here's something I've observed time and again: often the reason for our failure is that instead of trying to figure out how to be fully ourselves, fully the person God created us to be, we're trying to be someone else.

And as long as you're trying to become someone else, you'll never succeed.

And yet, again and again, we compare ourselves to someone else. And again and again, we come up short. We turn Christianity into a formula we all have to follow, and then we wonder why we keep failing at it.

Our problem is that we don't see a pretty insidious story at work beneath the bedrock of our culture. This false story is a lot like the individualism we talked about last week - we never think

about it, and no one ever taught us this story explicitly. But it's a deep part of our worldview, so much so that it colors even what we read in the scriptures.

That story is: Humans are machines.

Not in the sense of *Terminator* or *The Matrix*, though those films aren't actually that far off. But none-the-less, our culture today teaches us to approach our lives much in the same way an engineer or mechanic attends to a machine.

I know that sounds strange, but it's a story embedded deep in the fabric of our culture. It reflects a shift in how we view the world, a shift that took place around 300-400 years ago. Before then, humans all pretty much agreed that God ran the world. We might disagree about which god, or how many gods, but everyone agreed that the reason it rained and the reason we breathed and our successes and failures and everything was intimately connected to God's workings.

Pre-industrial people tend to think of the world as a big organism or big garden that God is constantly, actively maintaining. When the sun comes up, it's because God *makes* the sun rise. When it rains, God *makes* it rain. When crops grow and babies are born, it's because God makes it happen.

But with the rise of the scientific disciplines, as we learned more about how the natural world works, that picture of God became less necessary. Suddenly, we could actually explain rain in purely natural terms. We knew its cause and effects. We didn't need to say, God made it rain. And the same with everything else - where babies come from and earthquakes and sunburns and eclipses and illness and... well, pretty much everything.

The more we systematically explored creation, the more sense it all made. We figured out all these natural laws that governed everything. And the more we looked around, the less room we saw for God to be working. The less *need* we saw for God to be working. Scientists and philosophers and theologians started to change how they talked about the world. Rather than seeing it as a huge organism God is constantly keeping alive, that God is actively at work sustaining all the time, they talked about it more as a machine. They described the world as a complex clock that God made, wound up and just sort of let run.

And it wasn't just the world - we began to think of ourselves in the same way. Consider our education system, which originated about this time. Schools function a lot like factories or computer programmers: a whole bunch of kids who were all manufactured at the same time are all programmed with the exact same set of knowledge in the same way for the same amount of time.

The only real variance we get might be in our last couple of years of college, when we finally get into major classes. Before that, it's all standardized tests to make sure we meet the minimum government requirements.

In fact, for many of us, our experience in education isn't too different from our spiritual journeys. I don't know many other institutions that engender the sort of competition and sense of inadequacy that American High School can.

What I'm suggesting in all this is that our approach to both spirituality and education are predicated on an assumption about human nature that's flat out wrong. And that assumption is that deep down we're all more or less the same. That, like machines, what works for one of us will work just as well for the rest of us.

And that is not the worldview of the Scriptures. Obviously, the world of the Scriptures didn't have complex machines. They didn't know the Scientific Method. But rather than write off their worldview as primitive and silly, I suggest we listen attentively. Because humans aren't machines. And the Scriptures give us a better approach to spirituality, to life.

Consider the second creation story in Genesis 2. This Scripture presents the Earth as a garden.

This is the account of the creation of the heavens and the earth. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, neither wild plants nor grains were growing on the earth. The LORD God had not yet sent rain to water the earth, and there were no people to cultivate the soil. Instead, springs came up from the ground and watered all the land.

Then the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living person.

Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he placed the man he had made. The LORD God made all sorts of trees grow up from the ground-- trees that were beautiful and that produced delicious fruit. In the middle of the garden he placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watered the garden and then flowed out of Eden and divided into four branches. The first branch, called the Pishon, flowed around the entire land of Havilah, where gold is found. The gold of that land is exceptionally pure; aromatic resin and onyx stone are also found there. The second branch, called the Gihon, flowed around the entire land of Cush. ¹⁴ The third branch, called the Tigris, flowed east of the land of Asshur. The fourth branch is called the Euphrates.

The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it." Gen 2:4 (NLT)

Not only is the Earth a garden, in the worldview of the Scriptures, but we are gardeners. And that worldview provides a much more helpful guide to living, to becoming who we were created to be than the mechanical worldview.

Machines operate according to a formula. As long as you input the same thing, you output the same thing. And that's how we approach education, spirituality, everything. Put in a 5-year old, they run through "the system" and you get a college-bound, successful 18-year-old. No child left behind! Pay no attention to the ones that slip through the cracks.

Or back to the example we began with. If you get up at 5 am to do a devotional and that works for you, then that's what I should do too. Same input, same formula, same output.

Machine thinking.

But that's not the picture of the world or of humanity we find in the Scriptures. We're part of God's garden. And you can't maintain a garden the way you maintain machines.

Gardening is more of an art. It's a lot of trial and error. Because each plant, each garden, each season is different. What works for one plant, in one part of the garden, one year may not work for the other plants, or in other parts of the garden or next year.

I only take my car to the mechanic when something is wrong with it. He fixes it, then I drive it away. He doesn't show up at my house or my office to get it running every time I'm getting ready to drive it.

But gardeners must be in the garden every day. Pulling weeds. Checking on the plants. Seeing what's working and what's not. Too much sun? Not enough? More water? Less? Pests? Fertilizers?

Gardening takes constant, careful, loving attention. You can't just set it up and walk away.

The same is true with our spirituality. Maybe you need to set aside time at lunch. Or in the afternoon or evening. Maybe 5 am *does* work for you. Maybe you connect through prayer and fasting better than reading scripture.

That's why the various spiritual practices are so valuable. Some of us find a lot of value in trying to read the whole bible in a year, or reading straight through a book chapter by chapter. Others of us like to read the same chapter every day for a month or more, meditating on a few verses. Some of us spend hours in prayer, while others pray at particular times of the day. Some of us like to pray what's on our minds in the moment while others prefer a prayer guide. And so on and so on.

Which is the right way?

I don't know what works for you. I can tell you it's probably not going to be what works for me. I've even found in my own life that different practices are more meaningful at different seasons of my life.

Because we're not machines made to follow the same programming. We're gardeners God has lovingly crafted to be different.

So if you're like me, if you've ever compared yourself to someone else and come up short, my challenge for you is this: ditch the formula and start experimenting. Approach your life, your spirituality not as a scientist, but as a gardener. Be free to experiment. Talk to a few different people. Figure out what works for you and what doesn't. And when you find what works, do it. Celebrate it. Share with your community.

Having a place to begin can be really helpful. That's why we have a Guide to Spiritual Practices. It's a jumping off point. It's not exhaustive by any means. So if you don't know where to start, grab one of these on your way out and start experimenting!

You are not a machine. What works for me, or for the person sitting next to you, isn't necessarily going to work for you. And that's okay! It doesn't have to. It shouldn't. The diversity in our midst is a reflection of the creativity of our God.

That's hard for us to understand because we live in a world of machines. All these metaphors made a lot more sense in a world where most people farmed. They intuitively connected with this message.

So as a way for us to respond today, we're going to celebrate the best picture of diversity our culture has to offer: children.

Though most of us don't know much about gardening, we know kids. We know that kids are different. If you know more than one kid, you know there's no formula for kids. No two are the same and what connects with one kid doesn't even register for another.

So in a world where you're constantly being told you're a machine, and if you don't have a garden, look to kids. Kids remind you that we're all different, and that's good. God created us that way.

Baby Dedication into Preschool Bells

Today, our opportunity to respond to the message is through participation in two very special events: child dedication and our preschool bells.

In the Church of the Nazarene, we commit as a Church family to come around families raising children. We understand that we are these children's extended spiritual family, that as these parents raise their child to know and love God, they can expect to lean on us for support, encouragement, advice and help.

So today, as you witness these children dedicated to God, would you remember that just as they are all different, just as their paths to God will all be different, so too will yours.

They are not machines. You are not a machine. We are all humans, created in God's image and called to live the full life God created us for.

Benediction

Bulletin

AfterParty

Go figure out what works.