

The Gospel According to the Olympics 1: Representation
Genesis 1: Pride Sunday
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If you had asked me when I was 8 years old what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would have said, "a princess." I think, even then, I knew that wasn't going to happen, but it sounded like a good gig if I could get it. My inspiration came from the three Disney princesses that existed when I was a child: Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. I loved them all, but Snow White was my favorite. Do you know why? She had dark hair. I saw myself in her.

I remember when the TV show *Charlie's Angels* came out. The world went crazy for Farrah Fawcett. I was an immediate Kate Jackson fan.

I was an instant super enthusiast of Lynda Carter the first time I saw her as Wonder Woman.

And I loved Valerie Bertinelli in *One Day at a Time*.

In a world where it seemed like blonde hair was the beauty standard for women, these women represented me. They were smart, powerful, independent, and yes, beautiful...all things young Kelley wanted to be.

Representation is one way we learn how or even whether the world values people like us. When young people do not see people like themselves represented positively in the world in movies, TV shows, books, the news, and art, they internalize that. They begin to believe that who they are is not beautiful, interesting, good, or valuable.

***Kamala photo**

Political preferences set aside, this photo of a Black girl watching Vice-President, Kamala Harris, receive the Democratic nomination for president, is important. Finally, that girl and millions of Black and brown women and girls, see themselves in a presidential nominee.

I was 18 when Geraldine Ferraro became the Democratic vice-presidential nominee. I don't remember anything about her politics or even her accomplishments. I remember that she was a woman...she was like me.

If we want to understand representation, we can recall the outpouring of fans over the death of actor Chadwick Boseman 4 years ago. He was an international hero for people of African descent through his portrayal of King T'Challa in *Black Panther*. Playing an African king, Boseman displayed goodness, dignity, humility, and strength. These traits were seen in Boseman personally when the world learned that he was silently battling cancer during the later stages of his career. Through T'Challa and in his own life, Boseman represented blackness with nobility, respect, and honor,

challenging many of the inaccurate and racially biased portrayals of blackness in our world. Representation matters every day and everywhere.

Today is the first day of our fall sermon series: The Gospel According to the Olympics. Together, we will remember some of the best parts of the Olympic Games and think about how we might manifest a little of the Olympic spirit in our own lives. This morning, as we celebrate Pride, our focus, you may have guessed, is on representation. Representation is the foundation of the Olympics. Athletes from all over the world participate. Their skin different colors, they come from different cultures, speak different languages, and hold different belief systems and ideologies. The people in their home countries see themselves represented by athletes who are like them. Children watch as they see people who look like them standing on the podium with medals around their necks. That's the idea, right? The Olympics is a representation of the whole world at its best.

If we dig a little deeper though, we can see some other more specific forms of representation. For example, at the Paris Olympics, gender equality was finally achieved. In 2024, for the first time, the representation of women was very, very close to that of men. 49% of the athletes were women this year, compared to 2% in 1900 when women were first allowed to compete. It took 124 years, but here we are.

And certainly, we see representation in the Paralympics as well. The Paralympics allows people of all abilities, all over the world, to see themselves in the athletes as they show the world their strength, power, and determination.

This year in Paris, there were almost 200 openly LGBTQIA+ athletes who participated in the Olympics. This is how the Paris Olympic Committee described the Pride House, "On the occasion of the Games, a celebration of diversity, Paris 2024 reaffirms its commitment to the fight against all forms of discrimination, and shows its support for all those who are victims of it. In line with its desire to open up the Games, Paris 2024 is announcing the creation during the Games of a place to represent these minorities, a place open to all where it will be possible to celebrate one's community and one's pride: the Pride House · Paris 2024."

And of course, we all saw the representation of drag queens in the opening ceremony. This was especially notable because the world went crazy thinking they were making fun of the Last Supper. Do you see the blue guy in the picture? That's Dionysus, the Roman god of wine and food. In the vignette, he was hanging out at a traditional ancient Roman banquet that included drag queens. Personally, it would have been okay with me if drag queens had been representing Jesus and his disciples. Actors have dressed in drag for a very long time. It wouldn't be a bad way to tell Jesus' story of love and inclusion.

Representation is about seeing ourselves in the stories being told, whether they are real stories or fictional ones. As a preacher, my job is to help you see yourselves in the ancient stories of the Bible. Sometimes what we see of ourselves is uncomfortable. Like when we talk about the Exodus, the story of Moses and the Israelites escaping from Egypt. Most of us, as middle-class white people in the United States, ought to see ourselves as Pharaoh in that story and not the Israelites who had been enslaved. We are much more the oppressors than the oppressed. If you are someone who would call yourself a person of faith or a religious person (and I would say that is how I identify), I would invite us to see ourselves in the story of the Good Samaritan, not as the wounded Samaritan, but as one of the religious people who passed him by. That makes me uncomfortable, but it is an opportunity for self-reflection.

For far too long, Christians have been telling the Queer community that the way they ought to see themselves from a Christian perspective is either as “the sinner” in need of repentance or, maybe worse, not represented at all in the Bible. So today, I say to all of you, no matter who you are, what color your skin is, what gender you are, who you love, what abilities you have, or even what color your hair is, you are represented in the ancient stories of the Bible and even right from the beginning.

Genesis 1 brings us the first story of creation. Even if you do not identify as Jewish or Christian, I imagine you are familiar with the first creation myth in the Bible.

In the beginning, there was chaos. God existed with the chaos.
On the first day, God created day and night and called them good.
But what about dawn and dusk...those times that aren't really day or night?

On the second day, God separated the waters above from the waters below, creating the sky, and called it good.
But the story doesn't mention fog or mist. It doesn't mention oxygen or anything else in the air between the waters.

On the third day, God separated the land from the sea and created vegetation on the land. And of course, God called them good.
But what about swamps and marshes? What about mud, water lilies, and seaweed?

On the fourth day, God placed the sun and the moon, pronouncing them good, but the story says nothing of comets and black holes.

On the fifth day, along come the creatures that live in the water and the ones who live in the sky. They are also good. But what about mosquitoes who lay their eggs on the water and fly around in the sky?

And then on the sixth day, the story says God created “cattle, creeping things, and beasts of the earth.” They were also called good. What about penguins and ostriches?

They don't fly, they aren't cattle, "beasts" doesn't seem to describe them, and they don't creep. And for goodness sake...what about platypuses?

You get the point, right? This story, or any creation story, could not possibly name everything and every creature that exists in the natural world. We've assumed that all along. We get that. This story tells us how the ancient storytellers understood God. They believed their God was intimately involved in the creation of everything and they believed God was ultimately working for the good of all of it.

But wait...there is more to the sixth day. God created humans, male and female, in the image of God, and it was all very good the story says. God blessed them and told them to be fruitful and multiply.

But what about people who are intersex, transgender, or gender non-conforming? They aren't mentioned specifically.

In an article titled "A Transgender Journey Toward Creation: A Creation Theology," Theologian and Director of Digital Outreach at the Center for Prophetic Imagination, Kallie May Hargrove writes, "Every day of the Creation account in Genesis 1 contains some sort of division into categories. However, things outside of those categories are not meant to be understood as existing outside of God's creative order. Every single division is meant to be understood as a generalization."¹ And traditionally that is how Christians have read it, except when we've gotten to the second part of day 6. We acknowledge that there are swamps and comets and ostriches, things not mentioned in days 1-5, but people who are don't identify as male or female, on day 6, that is beyond our comprehension for some reason.

Why is that? Why do we struggle to see that as a generalization like the others? Typically, the answer to that is procreation. Human beings must be male or female so they can fulfill God's blessing to "be fruitful and multiply." Do we though? No, we don't. In the story, the being fruitful and multiplying blessing is given to all of humanity collectively, not to each of us individually. It is not meant to imply that it is the responsibility of every single individual to take part in procreation to fulfill the blessing. That would be ridiculous. If we believe only what is written in the New Testament about Jesus, we must then believe that Jesus did not procreate. Does that mean God didn't think much of Jesus? We know that people who do not biologically participate in bringing children into the world are not less a part of humanity or less created in the image of God than the ones who do.

So, to be clear, every person doesn't need to take part in heterosexual, cisgender relationships for the sake of upholding the blessing in Genesis 1 either. Being fruitful, multiplying, and taking care of the earth is a call to all of us together. It is a corporate call that requires humanity, in all its forms, to fulfill together. We can all participate in the flourishing of creation in many, many ways.

¹ <https://whosoever.org/a-transgender-journey-toward-pride-a-creation-theology/>, accessed 9/11/24.

Every four years during the Olympics, we get to witness human beings pushing their limits and flourishing in ways that seem superhuman. And we also get to witness the bringing together of the world. We get to see human beings with different gifts, from different places, who don't all look alike or speak alike or believe alike, but they gather to represent the very best of humanity. And it is truly beautiful and it is important. For us as followers of Jesus, it is a chance to see in the flesh exactly what Jesus' inclusive message was. Everyone is included. Everyone is invited.

Dear ones, no matter who you are, you are a beloved human being, therefore you are represented in the sacred stories of our tradition. Don't let anyone tell you differently. I like to imagine God using my favorite inclusive collective pronoun, "y'all" and saying to all of us, "Y'all are part of my story. Y'all are fabulous the way you are. Y'all were created to love and be loved. Y'all are loved more than you know. So, go show the world who you are." Amen.