

On my heart imprint your image

Hebrews 1:3

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

This Lent we are using a different hymn each week as the focus for what we are doing.

We begin this series with the hymn, “On my heart imprint your image” (to the tune, Freu dich sehr, Bach). It’s only one verse long. It presents that striking image: Imprint your image on my heart. What is that about?

What happens with baby animals help us here. When ducklings hatch, they imprint on their parents and follow them everywhere. The core purpose of imprinting is survival, which makes sense since young animals are dependent on their parents for food and protection.

Biologists today are bringing endangered whooping cranes back from the brink of extinction by wearing whooping crane costumes while caring for young chicks. The costumes prevent the young ones from imprinting on humans. Once they are old enough, the cranes are released into the wild where they join established flocks of whooping cranes.

In this hymn, “On my heart imprint your image,” something else is at stake. Here “imprint” has to do with making coins. “Imprint” refers to Hebrews 1:3, where it says of Jesus: “He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature,” meaning when you make a coin, you have a blank, and you have that which you use to stamp it. In the old days it was done one by one with a hammer to make that image.

In Greek the word is χαρακτήρας from which we get the word character. We don’t mean “character” in terms of somebody sort of odd, but the original meaning is somebody who stands for something. There’s an image there. We say somebody has character, meaning we know what they’re about, and they stand for something.

It’s that way about Jesus Christ. He is somebody who is truly God. He is true God. Keep in mind that this text is from several hundred years before the Nicene Creed was written. You recall it says: “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” Jesus is the very image. This is the thing we ask, that his image be stamped on our hearts.

Some of us may have used wax stamps or seals on letters to add a personal touch. You soften a piece of wax and then use a brass stamp to imprint an image in the wax. It doesn’t happen much anymore because a wax stamp increases the cost of the postage.

Another kind of imprinting is branding, as in branding cattle or horses. Ephesians 1:13 uses this image of branding or sealing, where it says: [You] were sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit.” We are branded the way slaves were branded.

Along with this image of imprinting, branding, and sealing, is the image of the potter, very frequently used in both the Old and New Testaments. The clay which is made into a pot, like the one who is branded, has nothing to say about it. It's all up to the potter.

Paul uses this image in Romans 9:20: "Who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to the moulder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?" God does what he does. That's the way it is. The potter does what he wants with the clay.

This is then at the beginning of the three-chapter section (Romans 9-11). Paul sets the stage for what he has to say at the end of the section in chapter 11, when in 11:32 it says: "For God has consigned all men to disobedience that he may have mercy upon all."

How in the world can this be? God works this way and then we are then like coins that are stamped, animals that are branded, clay that is molded. God does whatever he wants. How does it work?

We can refer to Luther here because he often has a colorful way of saying things. In the Smalcald Articles, which he wrote, but was too sick to sign, he writes: "We must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before" (Smalcald 3/8/3).

Across the page, in the same section it says: "Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil" (Smalcald 3/8/10).

Luther has a way of saying things that makes it clear. God doesn't come in dreams and visions, in holy smoke and hairshirts, in labyrinths and pilgrimages. He comes in his Word and sacrament here in church. Precisely the same thing is said in the 5th article of the Augsburg Confession. That's how God works.

We are caught by the idea that there has to be something that we do with this. It's useful to look at a couple of places in the Bible that show how there an original text that has been mistranslated. You are familiar with Gal 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God." The problem comes in the translation of the last phrase: "by faith in the Son of God." It should read: "by the faith of the Son of God."

The same is true in going back four verses to Galatians 2:16, where it says: "A man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Christ." It should read "faith of Christ Jesus." We are justified by the faith of Christ Jesus not in Christ Jesus. It's awkward to our ears, but you can see the difference.

One of the ways we can help ourselves is that when Paul writes “faith” we can put in the word “Christ,” and that often makes clear what it is really about, that it is what Christ is doing and it isn’t what we’re doing.

We, living in this modern world, in our modern mindset, are caught up in psychologizing what it’s all about. We say to ourselves: It has to be that which I can make sense of, which comforts me, what I feel. But it’s not that at all. It’s what God does through Jesus Christ, through his Word.

Again, to help us further, we come back to infant Baptism. Here again is Luther writing about this. He says: “We are not primarily concerned whether the baptized person believes or not, for in the latter case Baptism does not become invalid. Everything comes back to the Word and commandment of God. . . . Baptism is valid even though faith be lacking. . . . Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word” (Large Catechism, Part 4/52-53).

Then he goes on:

“I myself, and all who are baptized, must say before God: ‘I come here in my faith, and I the faith of others, nevertheless I cannot build on the fact that I believe and many people are praying for me. On this I build, that it is thy Word and command.’ Just so, I go to communion not on the strength of my own faith, but on the strength of Christ’s Word. I may be strong or weak; I leave that in God’s hands. This I know, however, that he has commanded me to go, eat, and drink, etc. and that he gives me his body and blood; he will not lie or deceive me” (LC Part 4/56).

How in the world can it be this way?

We come back to the potter. Isaiah and Jeremiah talk about the potter and the clay. Here then in Isaiah 45:9 (paraphrase) it says: “Woe to him who strives with his Maker, an earthen vessel with the potter! Does the clay say to him who fashions it, ‘Your work has no handles.’ God, you’re not doing it right.”

That’s the sin of presumption. Presumption comes in two forms. First, this where we presume to tell the Lord what to do. “Lord, you’re just not running the world right.” “God you forgot to put the handles on the pot!”

And then in the second place, there is the presumption which says: “Oh well, if this is the way it is, then I’m going to use it to my advantage. I know how to play a game with God. If everything is done for me, then I can presume upon it. I can play games with God and do whatever I want.”

All of this is so ridiculous because we do not see that the Lord is the one who does it, which brings us back then to this hymn, “On my heart imprint your image.” The hymn says we thank the Lord because he has imprinted his image on our hearts. It’s not that we, by saying this, make it happen. Obviously, the Lord does it without us.

Then in the third line of this one verse hymn it says: "Let the clear inscription be: Jesus crucified for me." When we baptize someone, as an additional way of pointing out what it's about, we make the sign of the cross over the child. Jesus crucified for me. This is the imprint, the sign of the cross, because he has done it. Thank God.

Amen