

ONE

AFFIRM PEOPLE WHO ARE MARGINALIZED

GENESIS 1-2





SEE AND CELEBRATE GOD'S DIVERSITY

To honor God's diversity, we first must notice and recognize it, and celebrate it! From the very beginning of our faith, the people of God have affirmed, through words and music, that everything in the world was created by God and declared good by God. This includes all stars, moons, suns, ocean and land life, even those pesky flies.

The *Honor God's Diversity* infographic poster illustrates the wonderfully complex, diverse nature of this world and its inhabitants. Circling the poster are the times of day, showing there is more than just day and night. There is dusk, nautical dusk, astronomical dusk, evening, midnight, early hours, dawn, civil dawn, nautical dawn, astronomical dawn, morning, and noon. If you have been fortunate to watch a sunrise or sunset while in nature, you may have noticed all the diverse colors and shades that seem to change by the minute, and the reaction of birds and creatures to the changes.

Human beings, all created in the image of God, are like snowflakes, each unique. Despite the categories we create to sort each other out, the fact is those categories break down and can never express the wonderful diversity God created and declared good.



INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE



**Everyone
is created
in the
image
and
likeness
of
God**

ALL ARE WELCOME!
Church of St. Francis

The belief that God loves and cares for all people is an important part of the bedrock of Christian practice. Many churches today have a statement or sign proclaiming that “all are welcome here.” It is important to affirm that all are welcome and loved by God, but our practice this session encourages us to go one step further and begin to specifically affirm the worth of those who are marginalized. Instead of simply saying “All are welcome,” we say “Immigrants are welcome.” Or, “LGBTQ+ people are welcome.” Or, “Disabled people are welcome.”

Why is this specificity important? When we practice explicitly affirming those who are marginalized, we lay the groundwork for standing up for those same people. Many of these groups are used to being left out even when people say *all*, because their specific needs frequently are not addressed. When we begin to name them specifically, we start to move beyond our assumptions and biases about who is made in the image of God. We expand the ways we see God reflected in the world. We start to tune in to the cares of those unique communities.

It is easy to be overwhelmed when we encounter injustices. We wonder what we can do to change our world so that no one is denied opportunities, hurt, or even killed because of who they are. The truth is that we build up our capacity to respond to these events by starting small, even with something as simple as affirming that these people, specifically, are created in the image of God.

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Marginalized people in my community:

Take a few minutes to name groups of people in your community who are marginalized. Then name some practical things that are being done or could be done to affirm them.

Ways to affirm them:

Living God, who comes to us in many and varied ways, open our hearts to recognize your image in every person. Open our minds to experience you in stories that are not our own. Give us courage to challenge the forces of evil that harm your people and inspire us to use what we have been given for the flourishing of all. Amen.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

DIVERSE CREATION STORIES

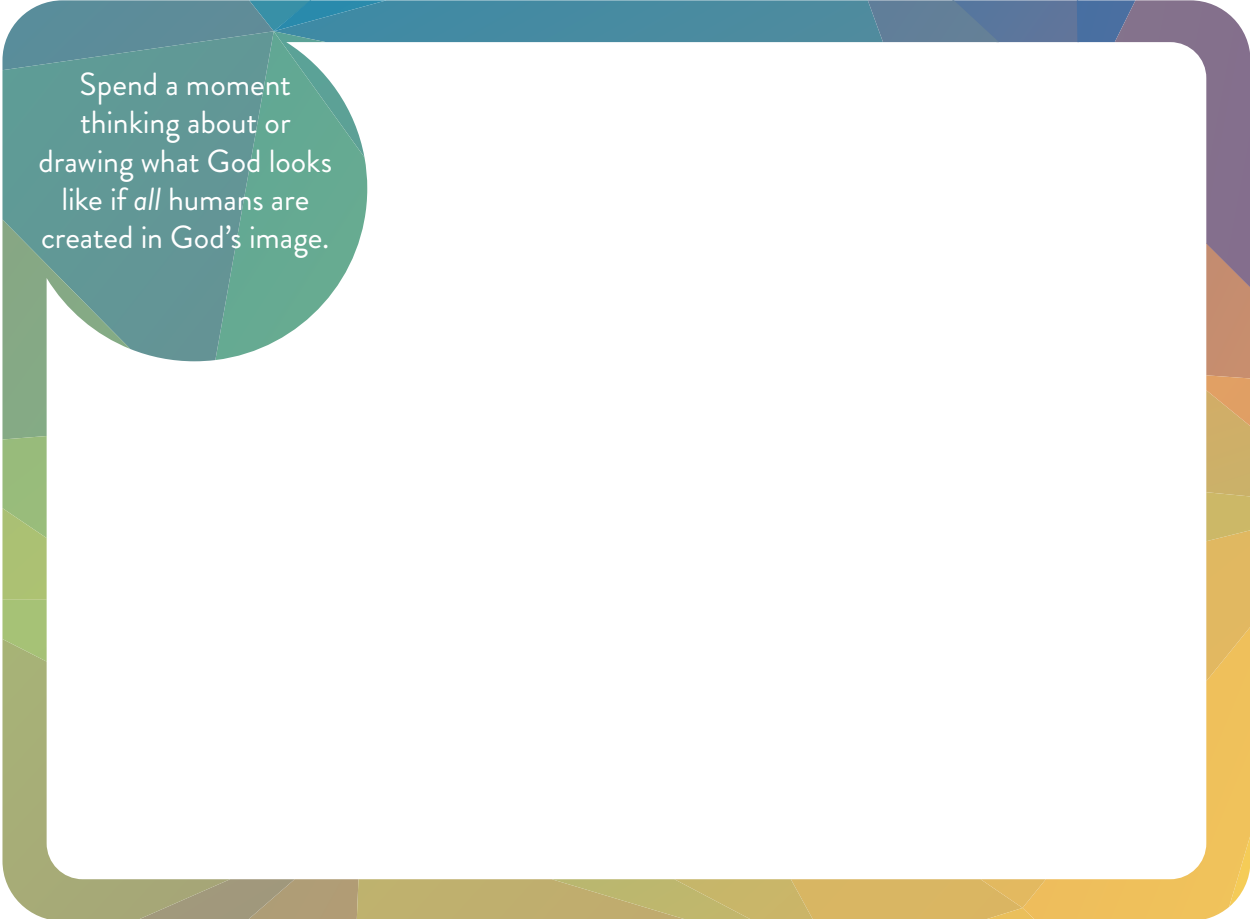
The Bible embraces a great diversity of voices. From one book to another—and even within a single book—the Bible is able to hold diverse genres, contexts, perspectives, and even theologies together. A beautiful example of this is at the very beginning of the Bible where we have not one but two creation stories back-to-back (Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Genesis 2:4b–25). Their mere presence testifies to a biblical value of diversity, and the content of these stories shows us some important principles about honoring God’s diversity.



The first story tells of a seven-day systematic process wherein God sets up the various realms where life can thrive before creating each living thing “according to its kind.” From the first couple of verses onward, we are inspired by the God who takes a watery chaos and calls order, structure, meaning, and even life to emerge from that chaos. Amidst all that God creates, we can appreciate the great diversity and value of all creation in the differences between every little piece of creation that God intentionally names as “good.” Among this diversity, humans receive a special mention in that we are not described as “according to their kind.” Instead, we have the unique distinction of being the final created beings who are all made in the very “image of God” (Genesis 1:26–27).

The second story is a bit different. Here, rather than transform a watery chaos, God plants a well-watered garden in a lifeless desert; instead of meticulously organized order, God's method is trial-and-error; the sequence of creating beings is different than the first story; and, rather than emphasize likeness to God, the story depicts the first human as of the same substance as the reddish-brown soil known throughout the highlands of ancient Israel.

The fact that the Bible holds these stories together (even side by side) while they each testify to a different perspective on God, creation, and humanity serves as a model for how we might honor God's diversity by setting up spaces that invite a plethora of voices to be valued. When we look at the content of these stories, we can see that honoring God's diversity can also be understood as balancing a broad focus with a more narrow focus. In the broader focus, the first creation story equips Christians with the general theological affirmation that *all humans* are made in the image of God. But the second creation story balances this wide view with a story of how the first two humans were created. The specific setting (major rivers nourishing Northwest Africa and Southeast Asia) and descriptors (being made from reddish-brown earth) applied to them can distinctively affirm the value of the brown people who identify with this region and these features.



Spend a moment thinking about or drawing what God looks like if *all humans* are created in God's image.

AFFIRMING THOSE WHO ARE MARGINALIZED

Taking a 30,000-foot view of the Bible, we might say the entire Bible is about God affirming marginalized persons. The Hebrew Scriptures tell of a God who rescued an enslaved group of people from different tribes and affirmed them as God's own (Exodus). When they organized and established themselves as a nation, the prophets of God called out situations of oppression with very specific words, affirming groups who were being left out: widows, orphans, foreigners, people who were poor. When this biblical nation of Israel was later ransacked and left in ruins and many of its leaders exiled to Babylon, God spoke through prophets affirming them as a people and restating their purpose as God's people who were to protect the weak and love one another better upon their return.

Jesus was born into this marginalized, colonized people. Through his actions and words, he searched out those who often were excluded by people who themselves were marginalized! His followers have continued his mission; to this day, authentic Christian community is at its best when it preaches God's love for all, specifically affirming those who are on the margins of our communities and world.

JESUS' FIRST SERMON

Luke 4:16–19 tells of Jesus reading in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He read from the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”



➤ What other places in the Bible affirm those who are excluded?

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Christian communities continue to consist of many marginalized people and affirm them as well. Following are a few ways to affirm one other and expand our language and understandings.

USING MANY NAMES FOR GOD

Genesis 1:27 says that God created male and female in God's image. Jewish and Christian communities affirm that God is neither human nor a particular gender. No single word can contain God, of course, yet too often people have defaulted into using only male terms for God, such as Father or He. This limits God's image and subtly reinforces a vision of God as male and a culture that favors men.

Many church communities insist on using more diverse terms for God, including many terms found in the Bible. Consider using some of these words for God in addition to Father:

SHELTER
GOD
SUSTAINER
LIBERATOR
SOURCE OF LIFE
PROTECTOR
CREATOR
DELIVERER
REDEEMER
MOST HIGH
COMFORTER
LIGHT OF LIFE
EAGLE
MOTHER

GETTING BEYOND THE BINARY

In a somewhat similar vein, more recently, scholars are suggesting we refrain from reading the passage “male and female” in the most restrictive—as opposed to the most inclusive—possible way. Although the text literally says “male and female” in reference to humankind, we know from science that biological sexes do not neatly fit a binary of male or female. Experience also tells us that the categories of gender identity that people live out cannot be confined to the two options “male and female.”

While this idea may be new for many, it is not a great stretch of meaning for the passage. The creation story in Genesis uses a literary device called *merism* to evoke a spectrum when using binary language, such as light/dark, day/night, sky/waters, evening/morning. Examples of merism are frequently found in the Old Testament, using two extreme parts of something to refer to the whole (such as the phrase “they searched high and low” to mean “they searched everywhere”).

- ➔ What other broad categories in Genesis 1:1–2:4 might be expanded, such as “creeping things,” “wild animals,” and “plants yielding seed”?



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WELCOMING THE IMMIGRANT

In the wake of harmful rhetoric and orders about immigration in the United States, Riverside Church in the city of New York felt that they needed to publicly affirm the worth of immigrants and refugees. During one of their Sunday morning worship services, they read aloud every verse in the Bible that spoke about the importance of welcoming the immigrant, stranger, and refugee. (Watch the Twitter video at [bit.ly](https://bit.ly/FMBibleRefugees)

[/FMBibleRefugees](https://bit.ly/FMBibleRefugees), 1:07.)

In a culture where the Bible is sometimes used to condemn, this is a powerful example of using the Bible to affirm.

- Who else can you name today who is marginalized in society but affirmed in the Bible?
- What are ways you could use the Bible to stand up for those people and communities?



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CELEBRATING LOVE

Sometimes affirming those who are marginalized includes taking responsibility when the church has contributed to that marginalization. As more and more churches begin to embrace the LGBTQ+ community, we must also face the fact that the church has been a major force contributing to their oppression. Many individual Christians whose understanding of gender and sexuality have changed throughout their lives have had to come face-to-face with the harm these beliefs have done.

Some churches have repented through public apologies, like the Church of Freedom in Christ Ministries in the Philippines. This Pentecostal church has shown up at Manila's Pride March for years, wearing shirts and holding signs that say, "We're Sorry," apologizing specifically to the LGBTQ+ community for the ways the church has harmed them. One Pride-goer in 2018 said, "It was just so empowering to have that kind of support from the very people who shunned us away."¹

- What would it look like for you or your church to apologize for something that you were wrong about?
- How might that lead to transformation?

If the idea of gender existing outside a binary is a new concept for you, you're not alone! Trans Student Educational Resources has created a great tool, "The Gender Unicorn," to help people visualize the different aspects of gender. See bit.ly/FMGenderUnicorn.

1. Ursula Perano, "A Group of Christians Attended a Pride Parade to Apologize for How They've Treated the LGBT Community," *CNN Health* (July 2, 2018), bit.ly/FMApologyLGBT.

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

All Christians can affirm persons who are marginalized, including those who are marginalized themselves. Jesus was marginalized, and he affirmed others who were excluded, including people typically called enemies of his own group. Here are a few ideas. What other ways can you think of to affirm people who are excluded?

SUPPORT GROUPS WITH PRESENCE AND MONEY

When marginalized people organize and stand up for themselves, it is a great sign of support when others who are not directly affected show up to their events and show encouragement. Sometimes financial gifts are critical as well.

AFFIRM PEOPLE'S IDENTITIES

We do not need to understand a person's pain and marginalization to affirm them as equally loved by God. One way we can do this is by asking them how they wish to be identified and use that identifier in the future. Often, there is not total agreement in communities about what terms to use, so it is helpful to find out from each person and respect that.

BUILD ON CURRENT PRACTICE

No doubt you already affirm some people who are marginalized in your family, church, and local community as a way to honor God's diversity. Spend a few minutes reflecting on ways you might continue and even deepen what you do.

- Who do you already affirm and how do you do it?
- What are ways you might affirm these people even more?
- Who else is excluded around you that you might affirm?

FOLLOWING JESUS

Just as the two stories of Creation honor God’s diversity in its many perspectives and in the balance struck between the broad and the specific, we are called to honor God’s diversity in ways that balance broad inclusivity and specific foci. To truly honor God’s diversity, acknowledging and praising the diversity that we see in the Bible, in creation, and in our communities is one step. But it is not the end goal. Honoring diversity—as opposed to just seeing or having diversity—requires the difficult work of striving toward justice and equality.

