

God Is an Amateur
Genesis 1, selected verses
Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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I love words, and I always think it's interesting to see how the meaning of a particular word can change over time. Let me give you an example of what I mean. In the year 1666 a great fire swept through London and destroyed more than half the city, including most of St. Paul's Cathedral. Sir Christopher Wren, one of the finest architects of all time, was commissioned to rebuild the great church. It took him 35 years; he began in 1675 and finished in 1710. People have said that he poured more of his genius into this building than any other that he ever designed. When the magnificent cathedral was completed, Sir Christopher, now an old man, personally conducted Queen Anne, the reigning monarch, on a tour of the cathedral. When the tour was complete, he waited with bated breath for the queen's reaction. She told Sir Christopher that his work was "awful, artificial and amusing."

Can you imagine how he must have felt? Here was the crowning achievement of his life and it was described as "awful, artificial and amusing." A writer who was observing all this noted that on hearing these words, Sir Christopher let out an audible sigh of relief, fell to his knees and thanked her majesty for her graciousness.

He reacted like that because in 1710 the words awful, artificial and amusing had a different meaning than they do today. "Awful" meant "awe-inspiring"; "artificial" meant "artistic"; and "amusing" meant "inspired by the muses, amazing" (from Richard Lederer's *Crazy English*, p. 72-23).

Words are alive, fluid, changing. Another word whose meaning has changed over the years is the word "amateur." For us that word has come to mean "someone who doesn't do something as well as a professional." If you go to an amateur barber, you don't expect to get as good a haircut as you would get from a professional. And we certainly don't want to have our appendix taken out by an amateur surgeon. In our usage, an amateur is someone who does something with less skill than a professional.

However, the word "amateur" comes from the Latin root word "*amor*" which means "love." In the original sense of the word "amateur" meant someone who did something "for the love of it." An amateur is not forced to do the task, is not paid for the work, but engages in it just for the love of it. An amateur does something for the pure joy they get from doing it, for the love of it.

If we use the word that way, we can say that God is the ultimate amateur. I read for the scripture bits and pieces of the first chapter of Genesis, the story of creation. If you can read this chapter listening for the poetry and inspiration that are here, you see God who is alive with being, and wants to share that life with others.

I borrowed the title of this sermon from a book by a preacher named John Claypool. Talking about Genesis 1, he said,

You can almost hear God saying, "This aliveness that I am enjoying, this wonderful power to be and do—it is simply too wonderful to keep to myself. I

want others to taste something of this ecstasy. I want the delight of aliveness to be a shared experience.”

And so God, without any coercion, God, the amateur, brings life into being for the sheer joy and love of it. God creates. All through this first chapter of Genesis God looks at creation and says, “Good...very good.” The Hebrew language here is almost like the picture of a little child playing in the mud who makes a wonderful mud pie and jumps up and down and claps his hands with joy and says, “Look what I have made; isn’t it wonderful.”

Robert Farrar Capon, one of my favorite writers, has written a wonderful little book entitled, *The Third Peacock*. Here’s how the book begins,

Let me tell you why God made the world. One afternoon, before anything was made, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit were discussing one of the Father’s fixations. From all eternity, it seems he had this *thing* about being. He would keep thinking up all kinds of unnecessary things—new ways of being and new kinds of beings to be. And as they talked, God the Son suddenly said, “Really, this is absolutely great stuff. Why don’t I go out and mix us up a batch?” And God the Holy Spirit said, “Terrific, I’ll help.” So they pitched in, and after supper that night, the Son and the Holy Ghost put on this tremendous show of being for the Father. It was full of water and light and frogs; pine cones kept dropping all over the place and crazy fish swam around in the wineglasses. There were mushrooms and grapes, horseradishes and tigers—and men and women everywhere to taste them, to juggle them, to join them and to love them. And God the Father looked at the whole wild party and said, “Wonderful; just what I had in mind! Good! Good! Good!” And all God the Son and God the Holy Spirit could think of to say was the same thing, “Good! Good! Good!” So they shouted together, “Very good!” (p. 11-12).

Now I will admit that the language there doesn’t sound exactly like the way the Bible says it, but it does get to the same place. It paints a picture of God, the amateur, the one who creates for the pure joy and love of it. It’s a picture of a God who freely chooses to bring forth life, who gives life just for the love of it.

And that opening chapter of the Bible sets the tone for everything that is to follow. The picture of God that extends from the first page to the last page of the Bible is a God of love. For the love of it, God created the world and all that is in it. For the love of it, God chose the Hebrew people to be the vehicle through whom God’s love would be revealed to the world. It was love that caused God to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt, to provide manna and quail and water for them on their journey. It was love that is the basis for the Ten Commandments, God’s instructions for how to live faithfully with God and with each other.

One of my favorite Old Testament descriptions of God’s amazing love is found in the words of the prophet Hosea. It came at a dark time in the history of the Hebrew people when they had wandered away from following God’s way. Hosea describes God’s disappointment with us human beings for the ways we failed to follow God’s will, and you get the idea that God is just about ready to give up on us. But then God says,

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I abandon you, O Israel?
My compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger,
For I am God and not mortal,
And I will not come in wrath (Hosea 11:8-9).

Even when God is justifiably mad at us for our failures, it is God's love that prevails.

God's love came to earth in human form in Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son." God's love took Jesus to the cross where he died for our sins. God's love raised Jesus from the dead so that we might be given the gift of eternal life. God's love sets the great heavenly banquet table to which every person is invited and given a place.

From the opening chapter of the Bible to the last chapter of the Bible, you see a God who is motivated by one thing only: love.

Let's go back to Genesis 1. Yes, this opening chapter of the Bible paints a picture of God who loves life and who gives it to others. But this chapter also paints a picture of us human beings whom God made. It describes us as being in the image of God. Now, if that's the case—that we are made in God's image—then God, whose love of life brought us into being, has also given the ability to be amateurs—freely choosing to live life built on the sheer love of it. This is the way that God created us—amateurs, with the capacity to act out of love and to experience the delight that comes from that love.

I intentionally chose this topic for this Labor Day weekend, when we do the rather ironic thing of celebrating the meaning and value of work by taking a day off from work. I chose this topic because it appears to me that these days so much of what we do in our lives—whether it is the work we do to earn a paycheck or even the things we do in other areas of our lives—has come to feel more like drudgery and a chore. The idea that we might find joy and delight in our work seems pretty far-fetched for a lot of people. For many people life itself seems empty of delight and joy.

You often see that in the workplace. But you can also see it in other arenas of life as well. You even see it here at the church. Some people see the things they do at the church as a chore. They think of it as a burden, a duty, rather than a joy. So what I'm lobbying for today is a recovery of our amateur status—doing those things that bring us delight and joy, looking for opportunities to do something just for the love of it.

I'll admit that I'm pretty naïve sometimes, and I have a pretty rosy idea of what life can be like. But I know that even the most delightful and joyful things we undertake have their share of frustrations and stresses. I know that life is more than just holding hands and singing Kum Bah Yah. But I think that the antidote to those stresses and frustrations is to step back and look at the big picture, to remind ourselves of why we are doing what we are doing, to remind ourselves of the delight that God had in bringing the world into being and to let a little of that delight pour out through us. Just as God created us for the love of it, so we, as God's creations, made in the image of God, can let that love show forth in our lives.

I'm just hoping that we can discover again the meaning of a life centered in love—love of God, love of others, love of this world that God has made, love of the gifts God has given us.

Praise be to our God of love. †