

13) Humanity, Part 1

Traditionally, the discussion of humanity falls into three parts: creation, fall and redemption. And even though the language suggests a historical progression, all three parts are intertwined within our humanity at all times. But let's begin, first, by discussing each part separately and then we can consider how they interact. In this part 1, we discuss creation.

1) Creation. The opening chapters of the bible have shaped the discussion within Christian theology on what makes us essentially human. While we are very much "dust of the earth" like all other creatures of the earth, we are also told in the opening chapter of the bible that we are made in the "image" and "likeness" of God. This has led to all kinds of debates as to what this image and likeness are about.

- Is it a physical quality (the fact that humans are upright creatures as opposed to the animals). -
- Is it our rationality or intelligence as humans? Would this then mean that the smarter you are the more you reflect God?
- Is it our power and ability as humans since we are called to have "dominion" over the earth and "subdue" all creatures (which is the traditional translation of original Hebrew words (Genesis 1:26) influenced by our western colonial mindset we've been taught)?
- Is it our unique kind of freedom as humans (which presumes the earth and all creatures don't have such freedom but are driven purely by the necessities of survival)?
- Is it our creativity and imagination which we presume is unique among living creatures of creation?

Or does it have to do with how we may relate to the world and each other responsibly and with care? The mid 20th century mystic Simone Weil gives it to us in shorthand: We are created out of love and for love. We image God when we love and we live out the likeness of God when the love in us blesses the world around us creatively, constructively, and when establishing relationships of reciprocity with other life. But if love is the image, likeness and the goal, what else is required for love to shine?

A) Freedom. Love cannot be love if it is not chosen from the heart. And that requires freedom. Any expression of love out of fear, survival, coercion or the desire for tangible reward is not true love. In order for love to have a chance to shine in us humans we need freedom, and freedom is necessary if we are to choose to love from the heart.

B) Freedom, though, is also about trust. There is risk in trust. If I trust you I cannot control you, but must trust your intention and your heart. This means you can also betray me or have some other agenda other than my good in the end. I must risk trusting your love in order to receive it truly and experience it as love.

C) And once we have acknowledged the risk involved in trust, we must also acknowledge the truth of our essential vulnerability as human beings. We are vulnerable to being hurt. We are vulnerable physically, mentally and in our hearts. But such vulnerability is also what makes love the greatest gift that it is because when it is given us in freedom from the heart and we trust it despite the risks, we can thrive and flourish in all kinds of ways. We build networks of friendship, community and family and we will sacrifice our very selves to protect and enrich what and who we love. This is the possibility and risk God initiates in the creation of humanity.

2) But human vulnerability also has another side to it. We have needs as human beings besides love. We need food, water and physical safety. We have mental limits and we need other people, the earth and the animals to survive and thrive. We are essentially dependent rather than independent creatures. And such vulnerability and dependence can create fear in us, and fear causes us to act out in ways contrary to love. We use our freedom to secure ourselves over against others and instead of cooperating out of love and for love allowing freedom to other life to choose, our fear can cause us to try to dominate and control other life as a safeguard for our own. In all these ways, love is sacrificed and our freedom is used in self-serving ways so that we amass as much security and abundance we can for ourselves and our own.

So then, there is love and there is fear and even as both of these live in us, we can be taken by either one into very different directions. Love and fear produce very different kinds of relationships and ways of functioning in the world as families and communities. Should God not have created humanity with freedom for the sake of love because of the fear of freedom being misused when driven by fear and a survival instinct that can harm?

Or maybe we are only totally free when we love. Making choices and acting out of fear is being dominated by fear which ultimately diminishes our humanity as much as it harms the life around us. Freedom and love go together, but we cannot eliminate the risk and the trust required if the prize we are after, ultimately, is love. What do you think?