

God and the Human Creature

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“What is man”, the Psalmist asks, “that Thou art mindful of him?” Who is this human creature God has made? That is the subject of today’s sermon. The Bible gives us some clues. It is a portrait of human kind in its glory and its sin, it’s light and its darkness. We are divinity and we are dust, mud and spark, matter and spirit all amix.

The first words of Reinhold Niebuhr’s great work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* are: “Man has always been his own most vexing problem.” The Jewish moral tradition says that we are the good creation of God, but that we have a “good impulse”, *yetzer hatov* and an “evil impulse”, *yetzer hara*. It is a realistic appraisal. Who are we?!

I

Let’s start with Genesis 1:27, the first creation story. We are told here that God created us in God’s own image, male and female God created us. So the first truth about us is that we all bear the image of God. A famous rabbi once said as

he saw a person coming down the street: “Make way, make way for the image of God!”

The verse also tells us that the image of God is both male and female, for God partakes of both dimensions. Sue and I recently visited Shaker Town in Kentucky, built by the Shakers, a nineteenth century visionary community. This verse was a key verse in their theology and community structure. Men and women were absolutely equal. Moreover, the leadership circle of every Shaker community was half male and half female, for they believed only then could they know the mind of God for their community. Genesis 1 tells us that God made us, called us good and blessed us.

Now let’s look at the second creation story in Genesis 2. Here God scooped us out of the clay, formed us, then breathed into us God’s own breath. At that moment we became “living souls.” Matter and spirit, mud and spark.

It is intriguing to me that these two creation stories were written during two very different historical contexts. Genesis 1 was written during the Babylonian exile when the Hebrew people were bowed low. The message: You are the crown of creation, made in the divine image, created good, *tov*, and blessed by God.

The second creation story in Genesis 2 was written during the heyday of the Davidic Kingship when the nation was riding high and tempted with human

pride. The message to them was: You came from the dust and will return to the dust. Your lives depend upon the Spirit of God. (Of course the dust itself was the good creation of God.)

A rabbi once said we should carry two pebbles, one in each pocket. One pebble says: “You are made in God’s image”. The other says: “You are dust and will return to the dust.” Some days when we are downcast and discouraged, we need the first pebble. Other days when we get too full of ourselves and are full of pride, we need the second pebble.

II

LeAnda’s wonderful choice of the anthem took me back to Psalm 8, which is itself a meditation on the creation stories in Genesis:

O Lord, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Whose glory above the heavens

is chanted by the mouths of babes and infants....

When I look at the heavens,

The work of your fingers,

The moon and the stars that you have established

What are human beings that you are mindful of them,

human children that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God [or the angels]

and crowned them with glory and honor. (Psalm 8:1-5)

So, here it is: We bear the glory of God, but we are neither angels nor God.

We are the work of God's glorious hands, but we are the creature, not the Creator.

III

The theological problem is that there is both goodness and evil within us. Who are we? Good or bad, or a vexing mixture of the two?

The Apostle Paul wrote confessionally about his own struggle with sin and evil in Romans 7.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate.... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil is close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Somedays we live in Genesis 1, as one created in the divine image blessed and called good. Other days, there we are in Romans 7, torn by the good impulse and evil impulse within us.

To embark on a morally serious path, we need to acknowledge our essential goodness *and* our inclinations toward evil. Francis Spafford defined “original sin” as “the human propensity to [foul] things up.” We must take seriously both our essential goodness and our inclinations toward evil.

Our political philosophies have within them certain beliefs about human nature. Some are based on human goodness, other on our crooked nature. Reinhold Niebuhr took both seriously when he wrote:

Man’s capacity for good makes democracy possible. Man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.

IV

There have been centuries of theological debate about human nature. Since Augustine in the fifth century, Western Christianity has focused on “Original Sin.” We were born in sin, and that sin is pervasive in our nature. It has shattered or obscured the divine image in us. As one has said, “It comes early and stays late”.

John Calvin, the Protestant reformer, took up this tradition and described our condition as “Total Depravity”, which someone quipped is a good enough doctrine if we could only live up to it. I know people who believe in “Partial Human Depravity”, that is, everyone is depraved but me!

Some of us bear emotional and spiritual scars from the overbearing teaching of “Original Sin”. “You are sinners!” was the major message we heard.

But there has been through the centuries an alternative theological tradition hanging around the edges of Christian orthodoxy. It believed in the essential goodness of humanity.

In the time of Augustine there was a British theologian named Pelagius who developed the theology of our essential goodness. We were born not in Original Sin but in Original Goodness, or Original Blessing. He was called a heretic.

This was the Celtic Christian belief, but Roman Catholicism and Original Sin won the day. “Original goodness” is having a comeback today in response to the stifling emphasis on Original Sin and Human Depravity. Instead of the dominance of the message “You’re sinners, you’re sinners, you’re sinners”, we hear “You are the Beloved, born in the goodness of God and blessed”. So, in the Iona Community’s affirmation of faith it says:

We affirm God’s goodness at the heart of humanity,
planted more deeply than all that is wrong.

A Biblical view of humanity should affirm our essential goodness while at the same time teaching about our inclination to evil. There is a danger in teaching only our goodness or only our sinfulness. Pascal said centuries ago:

Man is neither angel nor beast; and the misfortune is that they who would act the angel act the beast.

Here is one way to think about Original Sin: It is the presence of sin and evil which has insinuated itself into our minds through social and cultural realities which shape us in ways often invincible to ourselves.

Racism, for example, is imbedded in our culture, our politics, our laws, and our mental processes in ways destructive to us all. The biblical phrase is: “The parents eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge”.

And so with sexism, the devaluation and exploitation of women. It is there, imbedded in the male psyche and too often internalized in the female psyche, there in our customs, laws and attitudes.

So with hatred. It is so horribly easy to hate others, especially those different from us. A character in the novel *Southernmost* says: “Being afraid of someone different’ll make an awful meanness come over you.” Social grievances are passed down from generation to generation. Hate is an infectious disease.

The Bible, then, calls us to affirm our essential goodness and to be morally serious about what can harm ourselves and harm others.

When Jesus said to his disciples, “Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation”, he was calling us to sit alone long enough to be aware of what is a moral danger to ourselves and to others. I quote Pascal again:

All of humanity’s problems stem from our inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

Perhaps we should say we need to avoid *two sins*: the sin of thinking too *highly* of ourselves and the sin of thinking too *lowly* of ourselves. Which is your greatest problem, too highly or too lowly?

In a benediction I have often used there is a phrase that has been very important to hearers through the years: “*God give you the grace never to sell yourself short.*” Is that what you need most to hear today?

At the end of Paul’s confession ending in “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” he gave the answer: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” In other words, Christ. In other words, *grace*. Grace as pardon to forgive us our sins and grace as power to enable us to be who God created us to be. All ours in Christ.

