

Mud And Spark: What About Our Human Nature?

Genesis 1: 26-7,31; Psalm 8; Psalm 139: 13-14.

Who are we as human persons? That's the Psalmist's question: "What is man, what are we, that you are mindful of us, mere mortals that you care for us?"

This is one of the key questions we ask as we "Live The Questions."

Reinhold Niebuhr's towering two volume theological work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, begins with this sentence:

"Man has always been his most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself?"

I

Having asked the question, Niebuhr plunges in with what he sees as the central paradox of our human nature: we are a child of nature and we are also spirit that transcends nature, spirit that communes with the Spirit of God.

Our bodies share 99 percent of their DNA with all God's creatures. And there is in us a spirit, making us spiritual, moral beings able to choose the good and resist what is evil. We are, as I phrase it, "mud and spark." Both the mud and the spark are created good. We are a unified whole, blessed by God and called good.

The two Creation stories in Genesis map it out for us. In the oldest creation story in Genesis 2, God scoops us out of the clay and forms our bodies, then blows into us God's own breath and we become "living souls." We aren't GIVEN souls, we ARE souls, body and spirit created together.

In the later creation story, in Genesis 1, God made the world, then as the pinnacle of God's creative work, God created us, male and female, in the divine image and likeness. The story uses both Hebrew words, *image* and *likeness*. Jewish teacher, Arthur Green, offers an intriguing commentary on the difference between the two words. The word for divine *image* has to do with our hard wiring. This is who we are in our deepest and truest selves. The word for divine *likeness* is about our potential! We are born in the divine image, but we must grow into the divine likeness. In this process we become what we are. It is not an automatic journey. Day by day we grow into the divine image— or not!

II

Mud and Spark. What is important to remember is that both the body and spirit are blessed by God and called not only good, but "very good." Christianity, overly influenced by Hellenistic culture in its early years, made the fateful choice to call the body, and things of the body or flesh, bad and things of the spirit good.

This choice led to what John Dominic Crossan calls, using Greek words, “*sarkophobia*” a fear and hatred of the flesh. Much of Christianity thinks the same way today. It leads us to hate our bodies—and neglect its needs.

Perhaps we get into trouble if we identify only with the child of nature part of us or only with the spirit part. One leads us to be less than God made us to be; the other leads us to think we are more than God made us to be, perfect spiritual specimens. Pascal warned us of this danger in these words:

“Man is neither angel nor beast; and the misfortune is that he who would act the angel acts the beast.”

I think of our righteous Christian politicians today who pretend a godlike omniscience and want all of America to be governed by their brand of righteousness.

III

So now let’s turn to a second paradox. We are “awesomely and wondrously made,” to quote the Psalmist, and we are also prone to sinning. There is a gone-wrongness about ourselves and the world. What a confounding combination. Growing up Southern Baptist World, I was taught only the sinful part of this paradox; the marvelous part of us went unmentioned.

There was this tract we were given to hand out when we were out “soul winning”, as it was called. It described the “Roman Road to Salvation.” You may

have heard of it. Short passages from the book of Romans were used to lead a convert from sin and death to grace and salvation. I was given a “color only” version of the tract; its pages were colors to use as prompts for each verse. Black for the verse about death, red for sin, white and shiny gold for God’s grace and our salvation. The verse that was most hammered home, though, was the one represented by black, Romans 3:23 : “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” It’s true enough, but it was as if that darkness were the only part of us. What about the beautiful part of us?

The emphasis on the sinful side of the human paradox has a long history in Christianity. Augustine originated the doctrine of “Original Sin”, which said that carnal act of conception passed sin on to every person while still in the womb. Conveniently, the church also had the patent on the only cure for Original Sin: baptism, particularly infant baptism.

This doctrine took on even darker tones in the Calvinist doctrine of “Total Human Depravity”—which someone quipped was a good enough doctrine if we could only live up to it! Calvinism was built on five central doctrines which had the acronym TULIP. The “T” stood for Total Human Depravity. If you were a good Calvinist and believed all five of these doctrines you were a “Five Point Calvinist.” Timothy George, a Reformation scholar who taught at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and went on to be the Dean of Beeson Divinity

School, jokingly described himself as a “Four and a Half Point Calvinist”. He said he believed in “Partial Total Human Depravity.” That is, everyone is depraved but me!

I’ve known a lot of people who believe that, Calvinist or not!

But is there a spiritual healthy way to talk about original sin and human sinfulness? One writer described Original Sin as the “Human Propensity To Mess Up.” For proof of our propensity to mess up, just read the daily headlines. *The London Times* said long ago that “Original Sin” was “the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith”. We may be born good, but in terms of sinning we are quick studies. In other words, sin comes early and stays late!

The Iona Community is helpful to me here. It describes sin as our capacity to wound, to do harm.

Can we take seriously our inclination to sin and put it beside our essential goodness? I think so. The Jewish way of doing this is to say we are born in essential goodness, but that each of us has two impulses inside: the “*yetzer hara*”, the evil impulse, and the “*yetzer hatov*”, the good impulse. Every day we have the choice to make between the two. We choose which impulse will guide the minutes of our days. You’ve seen the old cartoon version of this idea, a person who has a little red devil on one shoulder and a little angel on the other. Which will we listen to?

Abraham Lincoln took seriously both sides of our human nature, writing in his First Inaugural Address his hope that unity could be restored by “the better angels of our nature.” Reinhold Niebuhr took both into account when talking about democracy: “Man’s capacity for justice [or goodness] makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice [or sin] makes democracy necessary.”

IV

So here’s the question for me: “Can we take seriously our human propensity to mess up, our capacity to sin, without succumbing to self-despising?” What are we to do with our human messy lives? Some of us grew up with a “Such a Worm as I” theology about ourselves which led to despondency and despair. Some of us grew up singing:

Alas and did my Savior bleed
 and did my Sovereign die?
 Would he devote that sacred head
 for such a worm as I?

Or we can make the opposite error, believing that “I’m so good, of course God loves me”! There was a bestselling pop psychology book in the 1970’s called “I’m OK, You’re OK.” But is that the whole story about our human nature? Aren’t we sometimes not OK? Someone drew a cartoon with Jesus on the cross. He is saying, “If I’m OK and you’re OK, what am I doing up here?!”

One of the things I love about the Iona Worship Book and its worship liturgy is that it takes seriously both our wondrous and our sinful dimensions. In its prayer of confession, we say:

Before God and the people of God,

We confess to our brokenness:

To the ways we wound our lives,

The lives of others,

And the life of the world.

Then we hear from the leader the words of God's forgiveness:

May God forgive you, Christ renew you,

And the Spirit enable you to grow in love.

From its earliest days Celtic Christianity emphasized the innate goodness of us all and stood against the doctrine of Original Sin. So in the Iona Community's weekly Affirmation of Faith we say:

We affirm that we are made in God's image,

Befriended by Christ, empowered by the Spirit.

We affirm God's goodness

Planted more deeply than all that is wrong.

We celebrate the miracle and wonder of life,

The unfolding purposes of God,

Forever at work in ourselves and the world.

These worship words capture for me all of who we are in all our dimensions. Wondrous, sinful, child of nature and spirit child of God.

For the Jew and for us, our creation in the image of God assures us of our goodness and then turns us to the world to treat everyone with dignity, for they too bear the divine image. I've told you the story of the rabbi who announced as he saw a person coming toward him, "Make way! Make way! for the image of God!" What if we lived that way, knowing ourselves as the Beloved of God, created in the goodness of God, and seeing every single other person as one made in the image of God?