



Humanity Sunday - What are Human Beings?

Psalm 8 & Genesis 1:26-28; 2:7-8, 15, 19 & Mark 10:41-45

September 13, 2015

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost

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“What are mere mortals that you should be mindful of them, human beings that you should care for them?” (Psalm 8:4). That is the question at the heart of the Scripture readings and the dramatic reading we have heard this morning.

The Psalmist gazing upon an ancient night sky lit solely by moonlight and starlight is filled with awe, and can only wonder why the God who created all this vast splendor should care about mere mortals. Why did the Creator of all this splendor make humans just slightly less than divine, crown them with glory and honor, and make them rulers of the world? What was God thinking of?

In Genesis 1 we hear that God made humankind, male and female, in God’s image. We hear God commanding humankind to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, to have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the Earth. In the second creation account from Genesis 2 we hear that God formed the first human being from the dirt, filled it with the breath/spirit of life, planted a garden for the human to live in, and gave it a job: to till and keep, to serve and preserve this garden.

In the dramatized reading we heard two voices arguing, each insisting that its understanding of humanity’s place in creation is the right one. And so ... are human beings created in the image of God or made personally by God? Are human beings like God or liked by God? Are humans superior to all other living things or kin with all the other creatures? Are humans intended to rule over these creatures or to be in friendly partnership with them? Are humans authorized to subdue and control the Earth or given responsibility to care for and preserve God’s garden? Will humans conquer creation or suffer with creation when it is conquered? Are humans meant to be kings ruling the Earth or servants caring for creation?

The short answer is YES. All of the above.

The two voices in the dramatized reading make the same mistake my students at Augustana College always made when they first realized that the Bible begins with two different stories of creation. Their immediate response was that one story must be right and the other one must be wrong. But that is not how the Bible works. The second story is meant to clarify the first. Yes human beings are created in the image of God, and yes we are creatures of the earth, kin to all other living creatures. The science of genetics confirms this. Human DNA is 50% identical to the DNA of bananas. Bonobos, pygmy chimpanzees that live only in the rain forests of the Congo

share 98.6% of their DNA with humans. Every human being shares 99% of his or her DNA with every other human being on the planet. Plants, animals and humans are all related to one another.

Last Sunday's reading from Genesis showed us that even as God organizes the planet to produce life, God equips and empowers the Earth, the plants and the animals to be co-creators. God equips and empowers human beings to do the same and then some. Being created in the image of God means that we have a responsibility to do what God does. In the second Genesis story, dominion is described as "tilling and keeping" or "serving and preserving" the garden. In other words, human dominion is about cultivating and nurturing God's garden in ways that promote the flourishing of all living things.

Just in case God's people don't get it, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us to show us how to do it. In today's Gospel reading, we hear Jesus' responding to a special request from two of his disciples. James and John ask for positions of special honor and privilege, confidently assuring Jesus that they are able to do what Jesus does. In many settings, the disciples' request would be regarded as a sign of assertiveness, an example of boldly going after what they want, of playing to win. But Jesus' doesn't see it that way. He says, "we all know how the world works. It's all about domination: people pushing to be powerful so they can tell others what to do, people using force and violence, destroying life to get the power and wealth and glory that they want. Well, that is not my way. The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

Jesus provides us with a model of servant-leadership. This is a way of exercising dominion that focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people, the communities and environments in which they live. Servant-leaders help everyone develop and perform to the very best of their abilities, so that those who are served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servant-leaders themselves. Servant-leadership is about using one's gifts and strengths to lift up, inspire and encourage others. Sometimes servant-leadership means letting others use their gifts and strengths to us serve us too.

I see a lot of servant leadership here at St. Stephen's in the careers so many of you have chosen, in the way you volunteer in the community, your work of rebuilding neighborhoods hit by the flood of 2008, and especially in the new ministries that have emerged over the last few years — our partnership with St. Luke's Spiritual Care department to serve as an internship site for pastors-in-training, our Stephen Ministry Team caring for members in crisis, our Senior Support Network serving the needs of our elders, our participation in the Family Promise program providing a hand-up for homeless families.

Our newest ministry, Operation Backpack is a response to the fact that 25% of the children in this community don't know where their next meal is coming from. The teachers at Grant Wood Elementary School have identified 130 such children. HACAP provides single-serve food items at no cost. Our ministry consists of picking it up, then packing up and delivering 130 individual bags of food to the school. These bags will be sent home in the kids' backpacks every Friday so that they have something to eat over the weekend.

St. Stephen's is one of the 9500 congregations that make up the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a church committed to serving and loving our neighbors, of using our hands to do to God's work of nourishing, healing, restoring and reconciling the world. The ELCA's mission is summed up in the tagline "God's Work. Our Hands." Each year in September the ELCA invites its members to engage in a day of community service. Two years ago a group of us spent a morning picking up garbage on McCarthy Road around Van Vechten Park. Last year we did yard work around the church and at Bill's, helped out at the Habitat for Humanity Restore, and accompanied Carole and Mick in the Walk to End Alzheimer's.

Today we are partnering with Waypoint to clean up the Madge Phillips Center at 318 5th Street SE. This center provides shelter and resources for homeless women and their children for up to 30 days. Blessings to all who will serve today. May our service be a joyful witness to the good news that every one of us mere mortals is a beloved child of God, worthy of love and respect, capable of making a positive difference in our world today. Amen.