

Rethinking Human Nature
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John 9: 1-16; March 2, 2008

Who are you?
What are you doing here?
Where are you going?

Such questions are not meant to be answered here this morning but I do hope you chew on them once in a while. Who are you? Do you feel worthy of the gifts you have been given? Do you believe in yourself? Are you the person you wanted to be? Are you the person God is calling you to be? Do you love yourself enough to risk living the life you were meant to live?

What are you doing here? What role does faith play in your life? Are you following in your parents footsteps or have you carved out your own religious path to wisdom and understanding?

Where are you going? Is someone else's view of heaven your only destination? Or have you discovered that the journey of life is itself your heaven? Are you busy running in circles or do you know how to free-fall now and then and float in God's all embracing grace?

Human nature is a complex dimension of life that runs the gamut from messiness to mystery. Some people live delusional lives. They see no connection between themselves and others. They live selfish self-serving lives, never seeing the cost to themselves and others that they leave in the wake of their own ill-conceived actions. A young woman I know was robbed this past Wednesday while waiting for a ride to work at 6 a.m. The robber asked her for directions; when she pointed to the street he was asking about, he pulled her handbag from her shoulder and ran to a waiting car. When I saw her Friday she said to me, "I see you as a spiritual person, my spirit is broken because of this, I have to rebuild my life. I don't know when I'll trust again." I doubt the robber gave a thought to the pain he left in the wake of his self-serving behavior.

Some people reach for the stars; they strive for greatness and purpose. They give generously to others and live not by compulsion or fear but compassion and grace. We all know men and women who qualify for this category. Most of us, however, live somewhere in between; we mean well, but because life has dealt us difficulties that seem insurmountable or given us unexplainable abundance, we never ask ourselves questions of meaning or purpose. We go through our daily routines; but never stop to think about why we do what we do and how life might be different.

The blind man healed by Jesus is a good example of someone dealt a poor hand. Not only was he born blind; he was also treated as a social outcast...his blindness in those days a sign of his sinfulness or his parents; that alone made him unworthy... Consider this response after he is healed. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' A blind person's options were determined more by social constraints than physical. By healing this man, Jesus showed compassion that others clearly lacked.

Because Jesus had healed the man on the Sabbath, the authorities were outraged and interrogated the blind man who could now see. The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world

began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. By refuting the suggestion by his disciples that blindness was a judgment by God placed on this person since birth, Jesus was undermining a long standing view that suffering and sin go hand in hand. The circumstances of the blind man's life were not just the product of how he viewed his blindness; they were intricately created by how others viewed his blindness and by their belief that God not only had the capacity to inflict suffering, but the heart for it as well.

John's story suggests a basic dilemma of faith. To rethink human nature- one has to rethink God. The blind man had no reason to question society's view of himself- he was blind, blindness was a sign of sin, so he must be a sinner. Likewise his peers treated him as a sinner. Circular thinking then as it is now can seem impenetrable.

Jesus, however, broke the mold: he taught his disciples that the Sabbath was made for human beings not the other way around. He also taught them that suffering and sin were not causally related. Jesus, like Buddha and other enlightened beings, turned his world upside down by refusing to let his humanity be conditioned by fear. Jesus refused to worship a God of limits...because he knew God to be boundless. So he questioned and confronted the religious dogma of his day.

To the established authorities Jesus was the enemy—

- their God would never heal on the Sabbath
- their God would not heal a man born blind
- their God would not disconnect human suffering from sinful living

Despite the evidence of scripture, despite the teachings of Jesus, many Christians still cannot accept the God Jesus loved. Jesus honored a God who loved unconditionally, who loved every human being without restriction. That God still lives, but not in everyone's heart. Too many Christians preach a God of rules, a God of distinction, a God of parameters. Because they have accepted a limited view of human nature they themselves suffer and make others suffer as well.

They live by a predictable story line. Human beings are corruptible and corrupting, end of chapter. God tries everything to get them to behave, they rebel. God punishes them with suffering; some see the light most don't, end of chapter. God sends Jesus to show them a different way. More people see the light, but only dimly, until God executes his ultimate plan of salvation. God allows Jesus to die on a cross so the world will embrace his ways and submit to his power. End of story?

Not really. To make this story work, human beings must always believe they are separate from God, unworthy of God's love unless they accept Jesus as their only Lord and Savior. To think anything differently is a sign of pride, and pride is a sin. This kind of circular thinking begets only one thing: more circular thinking. Such thinking is unimaginative and without hope. There is no way to go forward without going backward.

Jesus was not a circular thinker—he refused to live in the past. He believed in the future. He believed in a God of possibilities. He challenged the status quo. He took risks and told truths that others didn't want to hear. He didn't call people names like sinner, drunkard, tax collector, leper, illegals, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered.

He called people by name and he ate with them. Calling someone names is totally different than calling someone by their name. Jesus restored their humanity where others took it away. He received them as full human beings. Our calling as progressive Christians is a calling to hope. We are called to fullness of life—that means our life, our full humanity, is our calling

Who are you? I ask this question not just to make you think about whom you are but to encourage you to rethink every thing others say you are. What are you doing here? A recent Pew Forum report on religion and public life reveals that 44 percent of Americans have left the religious traditions in which they grew up. In the words of columnist Ellen Goodman, “they left the religion of their parents with the frequency that they left their old neighborhood.” This migration is not just a Christian phenomenon it’s a human phenomena. Americans are searching for new ways of being and new ways of being in relationship to God.

We are rethinking human nature, because we are rethinking the meaning of being human. So what is it about being here in this worshipping community that suits you? Lastly; where are you going? Are you moving towards a fuller understanding of God’s love in Jesus? Are you willing to leave the self-limiting judgments of your past and embrace the possibility of your own worthiness? Are you still turning your back on God’s grace, God’s acceptance, and God’s forgiveness or are you ready to risk letting go of anything that limits your ability to feel God’s unconditional embrace. There is no end to these questions. Even if you think you have the answers, more questions will follow. You must live them as well. And you mustn’t let my answers be your answers without taking your own journey into your own truths. Live your own questions not mine.

Our life is our calling and our calling is ultimately a journey to the fullness of God. Do not be cowed by the judgments of others, as the blind man was, nor burdened by your own capacity for self-limitation. Imagine new words for your life and live them. If you don’t know how to begin, then begin here. When the call comes to come to this communion table, be not afraid. There is a place for you here that no one can deny. All that is required is that you have as much hope in yourself as God already has in your humanity.

Who are we? We are love becoming love for the sake of love. What are we doing here? We are seeking the truths of our lives in God’s ever-expanding horizon. Where are we going? We are coming home to ourselves...to the fullness of our humanity and to the amazing grace that calls us to find God in one another and in ourselves likewise. Amen.