

When in Doubt, Be a Penguin! March 26, 2006 Dr. June C. Goudey UCC Simi

Ephesians 2: 1-10 (RSV)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. **For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.**

Psalm 8: 3-8

When I look at your 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,
mortals that you care for them?**

Imagine one day you get a letter in the mail and it's shining so brightly you can hardly read the words. You try to throw it away thinking it's a gag, but something about it intrigues you. So you decide to wait until it's nighttime and hope the darkness will make it easier to read. Finally, in the middle of the night, when everyone else is asleep you try again. Something about the letter is warm and inviting, not fearful so you open it with excitement. Suddenly a piece of paper flies out on its own and stops right in front of your face.

It's an invitation. To a reality show! No it's not from survivor, fear factor, Big brother or the Bachelorette... it's from the universe itself, and it's addressed to you personally. You are one of twenty people who have been invited to a conversation with God. No fooling! The catch? You have 20 minutes from when you opened the letter to reply and your answer has to be in the form of a question you want God to answer. Hmm? Time is flying by. What will *you* ask?

Take responses with Mike

The ancient world didn't have television, but it had reality...big time... and it was full of human beings just like you and me who wondered about life. The psalmist is a good example...in the middle of the night, awestruck with wonder, the psalmist cried out: "When I look at your 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, mortals that you care for them?**"

What are human beings? Is that what the psalmist wants to know? Who am I? Perhaps, but the rest of the question implies a relationship. Who am I in relation to *your* universe is more like it. I look at *your*

heavens, the work of *your* fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established. Here's another question. Where do I fit in this vast mystery and *why do you care about me?* If that's a question you've asked, and you probably have in some form or another...I hope you've found the right answer for you. And I hope you have known where to look.

The world is full of answers...and it's full of people who think they know the right answer. Those are the folks who wear periods on their foreheads, not commas. Those are the folks who have stop asking questions. But don't be fooled, life is deeper than any one answer. It's important that you take the time to listen deeply for your own answer.

In some circles: The Bible is where you look for the answer to any question imaginable. It contains truth with a Capital T and that's the only truth there is. At the moment that's not the circle you are sitting in...In this circle of friends, the Bible is not a book of answers, but a book of stories. The Bible is also not of one mind. If it was... everything would be clear and simple and accessible.

This morning I've put the psalmist's question beside Ephesians 2 to see what answer emerges. But what appears is more confusion: according to the writer of Ephesians which may or may not be the Apostle Paul, human beings are by nature children of wrath...who become *dead through the trespasses and sins* we commit by following the course of this world. That's the bad news...The good news is this: God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. "For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

The Book of Genesis is quite clear that human beings are made of God, in God's own image. The letter of Ephesians doesn't dispute this. Instead it reminds us that we are a new creation of God's when we accept that Jesus is all that stands between us and a life of sin. Simple enough? I don't think so. And here is why. Human beings are *not* children of wrath, we are children of God. And sin does not make us less than that. As I have tried to say before, sin is not a human trait that requires punishment from the very God who made us. Sin is a fact of life that requires healing. No matter what you think about life and its difficulties, it's important to keep human life in perspective with everything else that is alive.

To do that, and its not easy keeping life in perspective as you know, you have to remember that life is a gift from the get-go, from the beginning. What are human beings? It's a tough question! One way to put some flesh on the question is to look at another human being. One we think got it right. Some will look to Buddha, some to Mohammed, some to Krishna, some to Gandhi, etc, etc. Christianity looks to Jesus, but seeing Jesus after many layers of history have made him more and more remote is a complicated task. His disciples who were with him every day didn't understand him any better than we do on our best days.

Tradition asserts that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Get's complicated right away, doesn't it? When we *swallow the lie* that somehow Jesus was more God and less human than us it becomes downright crazy- making. If we believe 200 years of orthodox teaching, Jesus was without sin. But this answer is less than helpful. To be without sin Jesus would have had to be without the power of relation. If anything, Jesus used his power of relation in extraordinary ways.

If we want to understand ourselves better, we don't have to throw Jesus' saving power away. We just have to understand how he used the power God gave him, and understand that God has given us the same power to use for the common good of all creation. We also have to realize that once God gives us the power of life, God doesn't walk away. No matter how alone you feel, how estranged you feel, God is still with you and most importantly within you. The ancient teachers of the church looked to Jesus to figure out God... some said God became human, so humans could become God...not every one agreed.

New Testament scholar Walter Wink put the God-human relationship another way. "Lo, I tell you a mystery: God is Human, and we are to become like God." It would be nice if there was one manual to follow for every human being so we could all know what it meant to be fully alive, and fully human. But that is the wonder of life itself. Human beings are complex expressions of God and God is the most complex expression of life ever known.

Here's how I have come to understand what being human is all about. It's one answer in a world of many answers that much is true, but for now, for me, it is enough. Every human being is *an event*—a becoming—whose primary task is to inhabit his or her humanity fully. You and I are called not just to **be**, to eat drink, sleep, and procreate. We are also called to **become**, to grow into our fullness. I don't mean be full of yourself, as if you are the only person in the world that matters. Nor do I mean be a self actualized human being in a purely psychological sense. I mean become fully one with humanity itself. Be inquisitive and be aware that you were created with love and care.

In the 4th century (354-430) Saint Augustine wrote

People travel to wonder at the height of mountains,
at the huge waves of the sea,
at the long courses of rivers,
at the vast compass of the ocean,
at the circular motion of the stars;
and they pass by themselves
without wondering.

To wonder is to notice and to explore. Most of all the act of wondering is rooted in respect, not contempt. Remember the Psalmist...

"When I look at your 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,
mortals that you care for them?"**

There is no contempt in that question, only awe. Being human is not just a day job. Being human is a *lifetime* achievement, but what makes a lifetime is not ours to predict. You don't have to live to be 90 to have lived a life time, you can live just a day or less than a day and your life can have meaning. The key for those of us whose life time is still open, by that I mean receptive to breath, is to live fully. Live, as Meister Eckhart wisely said, "without a why"... live without doubt. Accept yourself for who you are. Respect yourself and recognize that you are called to be all you can be. Don't settle for someone else's

definition of who or what you should be. Find out *for* yourself, but don't explore the territory *by* yourself.

Here are some clues...follow them at your own pace. Being human involves:

1. Being in relationship with other living things. Relating to self (singular) and others (social) and God (the numinous)
2. Traversing the geography of aloneness and intimacy
3. Interpreting/communicating our experience. Telling our story
4. Embracing birth, growth/maturing/dying...an evolution of transformation. Change happens!
5. Accepting finitude; boundaries of grace and limitation. Don't settle for less, but don't take more than your share.

Jesus inhabited his humanity with grace. In every moment he calls us to discover the divinity of our own humanity through the power of imagination: that is the power of exploration, spontaneity, openness, connectedness, and interconnectedness. No matter what religion we look to for guidance there is one thing we all have in common. We are human beings trying to understand the gift we have been given. The purpose of religion is not to make the believer more religious. Religion is merely a tool of human expression that is meant to make us more human.

In Our Search for Identity by Marianne H. Micks, Fortress Press, 1982

"*Whether Christians are human* depends on their relationship with each other and with themselves and with the reality which lies beyond themselves—In the past and in the future, in this whole universe and beyond it." As the days of Lent continue consider what it means not just to be Christian, but what it means to be human. Don't take my words for it, or your own, but keep living the question and you will, as the poet Rilke wisely noted, live one day into your own answer.

Live without a why, but live always with a thank you. When in doubt, be a penguin! You don't need to have seen the movie *March of the Penguins* to know what I mean, but if you need more clues check it out. What you'll see is the *elegance of being as being*.

Penguins delight in being penguins. They coexist with other penguins, they procreate, they raise their young, they weep over life lost and they celebrate life lived. They play. They also pay attention to the dangers everywhere present. They don't live with a why, they live with a yes. My sermon title this morning is what it is... a tease... something to lure you back into your own life...the goodness of your own life. God made you and I, God made the penguins. God desires that penguins flourish, God desires humans do to. If you don't start with that basic premise and consider it good you'll be left to wander on your own without a clue. *So whenever you wander and you start to wonder remember the penguin in you and give thanks.* Amen.