

Is It Enough To Be Human?

From the series: Can I Honestly Believe?

Text: Luke 15:20; Psalm 103:14; Genesis 2:17

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I'm going to say something radical for a change. I'm going to say this morning that you are very beautiful people, that humankind is amazing, marvelous, and wonderful, and I think that in the church we've given people a bum rap.

If you've grown up in the church as I have, and spent your whole life in the church, you won't have a terribly high impression of your human nature. Oh, the church has not only had bad news to tell about the obstreperousness of the human person; it has had good news, too. Good news about the fact that, in spite of how bad you are, there is hope for you if you heed the word of the preacher and bring your offering envelope every week and support the institution loyally and follow the code of conduct that the community communicates to you. Now, you understand that this is all of grace, but there's a lot of effort involved in it.

I believe that in the church we have been concerned for you. We wanted to keep you safe. Knowing the beast that rages in your breast, we've tried to hedge you in and keep you going down that straight and narrow path. For your own good, you understand. But, also, it's been good for the institution, of course, since we mediate grace, kind of hold the spigot, and might have some influence upon whether or not you ultimately, at the end of this vale of tears, find heaven's gate open for you.

Well, perhaps you say that's a bit of a caricature, and it is, of course. But, there's a lot of truth in it, too. In the church, human nature has been brushed with a stroke of somber hues. We have not celebrated the human person. We have tended, on the other hand, to put the human person down, to be very clear about the potential for evil, to point to the load of guilt, and to indicate the end thereof, which is destruction.

This morning I want to say that, being human, you are amazing, wonderful, and miraculous. That, being human, you represent the movement of that whole cosmic drama that has been unfolding for fifteen billion years. That it was the intention of the Source of all being, that ultimate Mystery of all things, that this

whole drama should emerge eventually in someone like you that was thoroughly rooted in the earth, but also conscious and aware, knowing a measure of freedom and responsibility. As the statement on the inside of the cover of your liturgy by David Tooland, a Catholic scholar, states, you are the soul of the universe. You are the voice of the universe. You are the black box of the universe. In you this cosmic drama has come to awareness, to consciousness. Although you are and remain thoroughly rooted in the earth, your physicality being very much with you, nonetheless, that physicality, that body, is the bearer of spirit, and spirit doesn't exist apart from its grounding in the physicality of the person, and with that human being there has come this amazing, miraculous creature that is you. I dare to proclaim that, even in church.

Now, saying that, I don't want you to hear this as a whitewash of the human creature. One of the dangers of making statements like that is that someone is going to go out of here and say, "Well, today he denied original sin," or "He doesn't think that human beings are sinful." Let me read you a little statement that I have read you before but which I think is eloquent in its recognition of the potential for disaster that lives in the soul and heart of all of us. These are the words of a great preacher of a former generation, Carlyle Marney. He said,

Man is the most dangerous and savage of the beasts. His bite is poisonous, his hand a club, his foot is a weapon. Knives, clubs, spears are the projectiles to bear his hostility. Nothing in nature is so well equipped for hating or hurting. Confuse him and he may lash out at everything. Crowd him and he kills, robs, destroys, for his crime rate increases in proportion to his crowding. Deprive him and he retaliates. Impoverish him and he burns villas in the night. Enslave him and he revolts, pamper him and he may poison you, hire him and he may hate both you and the work, love him too possessively and he is never weaned, deny him too early and he never learns to love. Put him in cities and all his animal nature comes out with perversions of every good thing. For greed, acquisitiveness, violence were so long his tools for jungle survival, that it is only by the hardest effort that these can be laid aside as weapons of his continued survival.

Well, that's not a very pretty picture of the human person, and who of us would deny that it's true? We see it every day, played out in our society and, to the extent that we are self-aware, we see the seeds of it all within our own hearts and our own souls. So, don't hear me whitewashing the human being as though there is nothing negative to say. But, what I do want to say is that, in light of our understanding of human nature, in the light of our understanding of the human person coming at this point in that cosmic drama, in the light of our understanding of our animal nature being the ground of our spiritual nature and symbiotic living in tight union with it forever, in the light of all that, we can come to some new appreciation and understanding of our human condition. Part of the problem, I think, in the Church's understanding in dealing with human nature is that biblical paradigm that begins with an understanding of the human being

created perfect, given the gift of freedom, then in proud revolt falling from that perfection into a state of alienation from God, and therefore having to be redeemed by the grace of God. That's the biblical paradigm. We find it in the stories of Genesis. We find it in the theology of Paul, articulated explicitly. The creation of the person in perfection, the fall of the person through revolt, the redemption of the person by grace.

Let me suggest to you, in the light of our understanding of human nature and human history, of social development, let me suggest to you that we try to find another paradigm. Three years ago I suggested that the word emergence has a better image for who we are, from whence we have come, and whither we are going. Emergence rather than fall and redemption. Emergence as being a part of the whole evolutionary development of the totality of reality. If we were to take the 15 or so billion years of the cosmic reality and condense it down into one year, then the human being would have appeared in the last minute or two of that year. We are relative newcomers to the scene of history and cosmology and, in the statement that I printed also for you today to which I referred last week from *U.S. News & World Report*, the suggestion is that if we are the youth movement of the human story, then with the infinite resources in the star factories of the universe, who knows what further development there will be? Who would say that we are the acme of God's creative act? Who would say that we are the pinnacle; that we are that to which all creation was pointing? Who knows but what there are stages and dimensions of which we have not yet dreamed, and who knows whether or not we, the human family, have not been the instrumentality through which the universe has turned the corner? Because it has: we are really something!

With the human person, the universe has become conscious. With the human being, the universe has a voice, the universe has become aware of itself, is able to celebrate itself, is able to reflect on itself and on the other and on the Source and resting place of all. To be human is to be an amazing, marvelous, miraculous creation. But the idea of emergence indicates to us that we bear the marks of our past, and how did we come to where we are, if not by the exercise of instincts for survival? How did we get to this point, if not through the utilization of that instinctual nature that enabled us to continue to move in the continuum of the creative process? And if it is true that spirit is grounded in flesh, then that flesh still bears all the marks of that long evolutionary climb.

We didn't get here by being innocent children. We didn't get here by the careful exercise of human reason. We got here clawing our way. We are jungle bunnies. And although we have moved to a point where we become conscious of that, and where we become conscious of another way to be, crowd us a little bit and we very easily slip back into that survival mode, that instinctual response.

The miracle of the human being is that we can talk about that. We can look at our behavior. We know when we are denying our best insights. We know when we are acting against love and compassion and justice and care. We know when it is

selfishness, when it is fear, when it is jealousy that is driving us. We have that awful capacity to be able to jump out of our skin and take a look at ourselves. That's the amazing thing about being human.

If I suggest that that biblical picture of perfection and fall and redemption can better be replaced by an idea of continual emergence, that doesn't mean that there are not profound insights in the scripture about the human condition. We can understand the Genesis writer not wanting to blame God for all of the hell on earth, and so the explanation is that God created us good, we revolted, we are responsible for all of the evil. But, in the midst of portraying that picture, there were some very, very deep insights. The writer did understand our rootedness in the stuff of creation, being made, formed by God out of the dust of the ground, the mud. David Tooland says out of stardust. The recognition remains, however, of our oneness with creation. The Hebrew poet, understanding that, was able to give us a sense of the compassion of God for us in our condition. God knows our frame, he writes. God remembers that we are dust. Like a compassionate parent, God has mercy on us. I think what the poet was saying is that it's all right to be human. God knows you're human. Whatever the creative process has produced in us, it is a process that has integrity and authenticity and we are part of the whole, and that's all right. God knows our frame. God remembers that we are dust.

Oh, we beat ourselves up. We're so hard on ourselves because there is that struggle between that ideal toward which we aspire and the actual performance which we put out. We get down on ourselves because we fail again and again and again. We despair, we get discouraged. The Psalmist says, "Look, God knows who you are, and God intends you to be who you are, and God embraces you as you are." I believe that Jesus, standing in that tradition, was trying to say something like that in the beautiful story of that son who went into the far country who declared his independence, who went through the separation process, who came upon bad times, came to himself, became aware and then, still with a bit of manipulation, thought, "You know what? I think I could talk the old man into bed and breakfast." He came back with his rehearsed speech, only to be overwhelmed with a father weeping, kissing him, embracing him, smothering his well-rehearsed story. It seems to me that Jesus was saying that all the Creator God is waiting for is the creature to become aware and finally to be home in the embrace of God. At home in the wonder of the universe, at home with the tensions of being human.

Oh, good grief, it's not easy to be human. We are so fragile, so vulnerable. Jim Essebagger goes to the doctor and the doctor says, "Cancer." A candle burns for Beth Cresse, who in a moment has her life wiped out, leaving husband, children and parents and a community mourning this marvelous person. The flowers at the table celebrate the sprite of a life, an angel of six years old who dies! So fragile. So vulnerable. So perilous. And yet, and yet in those very experiences, in those very moments in the darkness of the valley, in the light of our fragile

existence, in the pain and the loss of it all, there comes forth from this human person love and care and beauty that defies the darkness! How can it be?

I want to tell you, you are really something, human crowd! You have your life rooted in the dust, even if it's stardust, and you have all of the animality of your physical nature that's alive and well. You carry with you all of those instinctual patterns that can be triggered in a moment, creating hell on earth, and you can sing and you can laugh, and you can dance, and you can love and embrace.

God, what it is to be human! What a wonder and what a marvel you are! And how good it is to be here together for just a few moments, to become aware of it again and to feel the embrace of grace once again, and to sense that inspiring spirit that lures us with love and beckons us with grace, and embraces us in the wonder and the worry of being human.