

The Insight That Makes Praise Irrepressible

A Reflection on the Psalms

Text: Psalm 103:13-14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. Psalm 103:13-14

With this message I will leave the Psalms for a time but, before doing so, I want to conclude with a Psalm of praise and thanks giving. If you want to classify it according to the interpretative framework of the previous messages, it is a psalm of orientation or, perhaps, new orientation, a hymn of praise, "a public song sung with abandonment in praise of God's person or the nature of God's creating and liberating actions." (Brueggemann) One could debate if the praise hymn is response to some surprise of grace or if it issues forth from the heart of one convinced of the goodness of God and the meaningfulness of life. I treat in this message Psalm 103, not to demonstrate one of the three classifications we have been tracing, but rather as one final demonstration of the beautiful way in which genuine human experience is acknowledged, brought into the presence of God and thus how *human experience is really affirmed*. By that I mean that, according to the best insight of Old Testament faith, *it is O.K. to be human*.

Human is what God made us; for that we need make no apologies. To be human is to be a person on the way, a person in process; it is thus to be incomplete. To be human is to be vulnerable and to be fallible; to be human is to live in tension between the highest idealism and the lowest meanness, between high aspirations and moderate achievement, between soaring dreams and visions and frustrating roadblocks. To be human is to know the good and fail to perform it, to resolve the best and too often produce the worst.

That being the truth of our humanness, there is a marvelous statement in Psalm 103 that should mean everything to us. *It is an insight that makes praise irrepressible*. In a psalm full of insight, it is this insight that makes it impossible to be silent.

As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. Psalm 103:13-14

Is there any greater comfort than that? He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

He knows our frame - of course, is he not our Creator?

He remembers that we are dust - of course, that is the way he made us.

And, in contrast, these affirmations are not simply statements of fact; rather, I hear the Psalmist saying, "It is all right to be human." We can be who we are.

A more accurate translation of our text is:

For he knows our form, mindful that we are clay.

That calls to our minds immediately the creation account in Genesis 2. In the profound imagery and symbolism of that creation story we read,

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Genesis 2:7

The word for man is generic in the Hebrew; it is *adham* from whence we derive Adam. The story, however, is not first of all about a man named Adam, but about a creature, *Adham*, who is formed from *Adhamah*, "dust", or better, "clay." One translation of Genesis 2:7 puts it this way:

God formed man (Adam) from the clods in the soil (Adama).

We will probably never displace "dust" from our minds, yet the meaning is that the stuff of the soil is the stuff of which the human creature is formed. Sometime we speak of a human person as an "earthling" and this would be a comparable play on words - an earthling of the earth. It would be stretching it a bit if we found here the source of that negative label we sometimes put on ourselves when we refer to ourselves or another as a "clod." Yet perhaps precisely that common put-down points up a critical insight; we do put ourselves and others down for being what we are in our clumsy and awkward moments. We feel "cloddy." However, what we must see is that the reality of our identity with the created order is not in the Bible a put-down; it is simply an open recognition, an owning of our very creatureliness - a part of a created whole which the Hebrew writer understood as being pronounced "good" as it came from the Creator's hand. To the extent that the generic name "man" came to be used as a name for a person, it reflects the ancient idea that a name literally "named," that is, it bespoke the essence of the thing named. Adam, then, if you would think of a concrete human creature, was named according to his intimate relationship to the earth.

The image of the Genesis story, which is reflected in our text, is that of God as the potter who takes up the clay and fashions it into the design of His desiring. The human creature is the product, if you will, of the Divine design and initiation. God has created us; God has fashioned us to reflect His own creative purpose.

If we back up to Genesis 1, we find that account of Creation speaking of God creating the human person in His own image, which truth is picked up in Psalm 8, the psalm with which this series of messages began,

... Thou hast made him little less than God, ...

That idea of the image of God in which we were created speaks of our relationship to God, that which connects us to Him and sets us apart from the rest of the created order. But that is not our concern in this message. Here I would emphasize our earthiness, our connectedness to the created order.

And what I want to emphasize is that that is not noted in a negative tone, but in a factual statement of the way it is because that is the way God willed it to be. God knows our form. He remembers that we are clay.

This statement follows a statement of God's compassion for His people. The image used is that of a parent;

As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him.

Thus the point the Psalmist is making is that God is compassionate. Four times in this psalm he refers to God's steadfast love, the beautiful Hebrew word *hesed* we noted last week in the text from Lamentations 3. God can be trusted to be merciful and compassionate just as a good parent naturally feels compassion and mercy for a child. We do not have to apologize for who we are or what we are. The Psalmist points out that we are what we are because God created us to be what we are.

That is an insight that makes praise irrepressible. The solid sense of being accepted as we are, being valued for the persons we are, being affirmed in our very humanness is the basis for our own self esteem and self worth. We are God's creation; we are a reflection of the Divine intention.

Now, I can hear an objection:

"Ah, yes, but we have sinned; we have defaced the image of God; we have forfeited our status as children; certainly you claim too much, you must be soft pedaling the guilt we have brought on ourselves."

Let me respond to that.

First of all, we have been far too obsessed with the idea of sin in the Church. That is a bold statement and no doubt sounds strange coming from the Christian pulpit, but stay with me for a moment. I will come to the reality of human sin eventually and there is no need to downplay that in order to lift up the human person. But my point here is that too often in the Church being human has been understood almost as being identical with being sinner. Now from our text I sense that the psalmist is reflecting the feeling that God is easier on being human than many of us human beings are - especially we who make up the Church.

What does it mean to be human? To be human is to be created, not creator; it is to be creature, not God. That must be obvious. Yet we do forget it and perhaps it is precisely the power of our sin that we forget we are human and are rather driven by a god-complex. Nonetheless, we are human and, therefore, *we are creatures of history*.

We live in the stream of history; we live one day at a time, moment by moment, with no possibility of jumping out of the stream and surveying it from a perspective beyond it.

How we would love to know what lies around the corner. How we would love to know the unfolding drama of history and of our own lives before time, but that is precisely it – to be human is to have no "before time;" it is to have *time*, the present. To be sure, there is a past and we learn from it if we are wise. There is a future and we prepare for it if we are wise. But the past is written; the future is not yet; we are writing the present - now is the only moment we ever have.

Our lives are lived in moments of decision - critical choices we must make time and again - choices of lesser import daily and we must do it with only limited knowledge, limited insight, some measure of wisdom - more or less -and some store of experience.

We are fragile, vulnerable creatures. From time to time we hear of someone whose fragile existence hangs on by a thread. An accident brings one to the very brink of death and a life support system keeps life until the body functions once again. A stroke, an aneurism, a coronary.

The psalmist of Psalm 139 wrote, "We are fearfully and wonderfully made," and we are! The human body is a marvel to fill us with awe. And it is fragile – a breath, a heartbeat away from being over. Too much thought of life's vulnerability could drive one out of one's mind.

We are part of a community and world where *free choice and responsible decisions are everyone's*. Therefore, we cannot really determine our own destiny as though all critical factors were for our deciding. Beyond our personal decision are the choices and decisions of the whole community, the nation, indeed, the nations. What happens if the fanatical fundamentalism of the Shiite Moslems brings the world into conflagration?

Being part of the whole is God's intention for us – living in community – but that also means we are at the mercy of decisions and choices beyond our own in so many crucial areas that determine our wellbeing.

We are mortal; we will all die. I could go on citing the characteristics of our human existence, but let's cite just this one final reality – our mortality. That puts the limit on our dreams, our visions, our designing, our building and acquiring. We are limited by that terminus point which no one knows and no one can predict. Indeed, we do live under the shadow of death.

There is so much more one could say, but this is enough to make the point I am trying to make. We are fragile, vulnerable creatures. We are a marvel; we ought to stand in awe of our humanness; yet it is also a threatened existence that is ours. I have a book on my shelf entitled, *The Worry and Wonder of Being Human*. Indeed!

If all the above is true, then we fragile creatures of dust (or clay) are bound to live with some anxiety. We are constantly moving into uncharted waters exposed to a thousand threats having limited knowledge and yet having to make choices for good or ill. And we will make mistakes, wrong choices.

And being anxious, we will become defensive and self-protective. And being free and independent (relatively), we will be pushed by self concern and concern for those closest to us. And such self-centered motivation gone awry has written the horror story of human history, but we could not be the creatures we are without that drive for independence and a certain aggressiveness.

We feel that tension in the family. We try to socialize our children, teach them the limits of acceptable behavior. Yet we do not want to break their will or crush their spirit and sometimes when our own children plunge and lunge at life we may get nervous and yet, at the same time, feel a little pride at their daring.

A great danger of our educational system is that we socialize too successfully and cut the creative nerve of the child. It is only a further development of that when in totalitarian countries the system would undercut all free and independent thinking and produce row after row of socially controlled robots.

Now hear the text again.

As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. He knows our form, He remembers we are clay.

Was not the psalmist saying that it is precisely in our fragile and vulnerable human existence that we are looked upon with compassion by God Who made us and made us just the way we are? It is on that basis that I began with the assertion that it is O.K. to be human. It is O.K. to be limited, vulnerable, fragile and susceptible to err.

But, my objector persists:

"Are we not sinners? Have we not rebelled against God's purpose and do we not set ourselves up against God and our neighbor?"

Of course.

Let me say again, to make my point I do not need or intend to whitewash the sin of the human person. I could go on now to paint the canvas of the human portrait black and shadowy gray: selfishness, meanness, pettiness, cruelty, violent madness. The picture does not have to be overdrawn to convince us of something in the human creature that is twisted, warped, distorted, and we know it well because there is no sin "out there" that I cannot find "in here," in the secret depths of my own heart.

But again, to be honest with all of that is not simply to write off the human creature. In his *Christian Faith*, Berkhof suggests that the Genesis story of human creation ought to be heard not so much as a story of a perfect state followed by a fallen state, but of a human creature always caught between the tug of the lower and the call of the higher. But even that is not the point. The point is made so beautifully in the Psalms. The God Who, father like, has compassion on us and knows us is the God Who has also provided for us forgiveness.

Sometimes I think we have never really heard the declaration of forgiveness. Sometimes I hear it spoken here and still condemn myself. Could the Scripture be any clearer?

*As far as the East is from the West - as high as the heaven is above the earth, so great is His mercy, His steadfast love;
He does not deal with us according to our sins.*

How shamefully we have muffled that message in the Church. How assiduously we have marched over the earth preaching sin in order then to present sin's solution. How much wiser we would have been if only we had preached the solution already in effect and then invited persons to come home to the Father's house because there is no longer any reason to stay away.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ which is only the full realization of the grace of which the psalmist sang is the announcement of the radical, unconditional, all-encompassing, universal love of the eternal God Who made us and loves us just as we are - human, all too human!

That is the biblical message; that is the passionate center of the one story of the Bible. It is a story of a Creator, full of grace, Who fully understands us and unconditionally loves us. God created us human with all the struggle that that entails and God will not let us go 'til we take on the shape of the one who lived a

fully human existence as the faithful human covenant partner of the covenant-keeping God.

No wonder the psalmist burst forth in praise as he reviewed what God does for His children - forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies and renews.

Bless the Lord, O my soul!