

Honestly Human

From the series: Religion and the Human Story

Romans 7:14-25; Mark 2:18-28

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
March 2, 2003

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Religion has damaged as many people throughout the centuries as it has healed. I say that not as a shocking opening statement, I say that not to be provocative, I say that because I really believe that. Religion has had a tendency to become oppressive and to lead people into depression rather than into liberation, freedom, and joy.

I met a person, in this case a woman, this past week whom I had not seen for over forty years, and over forty years ago she was what one would call a deeply spiritual person, and I say that positively, a woman of prayer, prayer circles, missionary activity, great piety and devotion. When I saw her this week after forty years, I was surprised at her face. Someone has said you could tell a great deal about a person from his or her face. Her face did not reflect to me joy, pleasure, delight, or a certain lightness of being. Her face, her visage communicated to me a certain heaviness, even grumpiness. I thought to myself that all of the intense, sincere and serious cultivation of the spiritual life, for all of that, she did not strike me as being very happy.

Not so long ago I took a book down from the shelf that I hadn't touched in a long time, blew the dust off and it flopped open to a spot where there was a small brochure. It was produced in the early 60s when I was here the first time. We weren't called Christ Community at that time; the other name will not be mentioned. There I was with my picture on it, of course, just fresh out of seminary, and my visage communicated in that picture, a serious, moral, completely dedicated, young man, young old man, and in that little brochure we had a number of affirmations, all very orthodox which we surely believed. I was embarrassed and amused as I looked at it. So, I took it to Duba's on Tuesday to the luncheon and gave it to Duncan Littlefair just so he would know the kind of persons he, was hanging out with. The next week he came to the table and said to the table, "I want to show you a story of salvation," and he held up that brochure with my picture and he said, "This man was lost." And then he pointed at me and he said, "Look at his face. He has been saved." That's a true story and I know existentially that it is true.

To be human is to be a creature in conflict. It is to be a creature living with a constant tension. The Apostle Paul knew that and that famous seventh chapter of Romans I can never read without feeling the intensity of Paul's own inward struggle. There is a long history of interpretation of that passage. It is amazing what people get out of that passage. I am not going to bore you with all of that interpretation all over the map. I think it is enough to read it and to say Paul knew the excruciating pain of being a creature living in tension.

W. H. Auden, in the little quote in your liturgy, says, "There are times when wouldn't we like to be unreflective animals? Or disembodied spirits?" because either way, no problem. Don't we know in the depths of our being that about which Paul was writing? Of course we do. Krister Stendahl says that for Paul this was a midrash on the Genesis story of the fall, because Paul was trying to understand how he could affirm the Torah, the way of life, the law of God, how he could affirm that in his inward being and do such a miserable job of fulfilling it. How could he will to do one thing and do another?

Have you ever been there? Don't we know? Is not there that within us that would soar and love and grace and bless and affirm, and that within us which is dark, mean, and that which makes us blush? That is the human situation. St. Paul would say it is because we are fallen creatures. I don't happen to agree with Paul on that one. I don't think it is because we are fallen creatures, I think it is because we are human creatures. Here we are, after eons and eons and eons of time, of evolutionary process that has brought about creatures like us who carry with us all of the animality of our background rooted in the dust of the earth, and creatures who have become aware, conscious, susceptible to the lure of love, able at times to soar into transcendent realms and ecstatic joy. We are not fallen. We are just human, and to be honestly human is to recognize that conflict within which is a given, with being human beings such as we are.

In the wisdom of the ancient church, it was that tension within that gave rise to *Mardi Gras*. I became aware of that rather late in life, too. It was the covering of the parade in New Orleans, I suppose some few years ago, when the commentator spoke about the wisdom of the ancient church in giving people an opportunity to cut loose, to blow off steam and get it all out of their system before they entered into the darkness and the solemnity of that season of Lent when they were called to self-denial and contemplation. It immediately made sense to me that the church in its best wisdom has understood the nature of the human which it is explained as a term of being fallen or whether it is understood, as we do today, with psychological insight and behavioral sciences, etc., that it is simply the given with being what we are. Nonetheless, in the wisdom of the church, the whole being needs to be recognized and ownership taken.

Some years ago when Gertrud Mueller Nelson was here and we were introduced to her wonderful book on the celebration of the seasons, *Dance With God*. I was struck with her description of Carnival, and the purpose of Carnival and the

acknowledgment of that shadow side that is within all of us and that need for ownership thereof and release of, but release of in some measured and controlled manner.

Martin Marty says that the church is afraid to allow us ecstasy, because ecstasy actually from the Greek *sphotis*, out of that state in which one is, or to be out of oneself; or to be beside oneself, to be crazy. The suggestion is that now and again we should be given permission simply to be crazy. In the rituals of the church, to the extent that they are healthy and human-enhancing, they will provide those channels whereby we can tap our feet and be ushered into delight and know the taste of sheer joy.

I love to watch the children when the jazz ensemble or the musicians are singing on a day like this. I saw Greg Martin's little daughter doing her thing. She's got the rhythm, Greg, she was replicating you right there in the pew, and when I see that happen, I know there is something right about that. In contrast to the little child who, sitting next to her mother, was turning around and making eye contact and smiling with all those around until her mother reined her in, gave her a squeeze and said, "Remember you're in church."

Gordon Cosby, who is the founder of that well-publicized and marvelous ministry in Washington D.C., the Church of the Saviour, tells about a time when he was invited by a New England congregation to come up and preach at a midweek Lenten service, and he said the service was so dull and uninspiring, the only thing that moved in the whole service were the offering plates. He and his wife left rather down and dispirited and the congregation had secured for them a room in the village, and it happened to be over the tavern, and he and his wife retired to their room and beneath them were emanating the sounds of music and laughter and joy, and he looked at his wife and said, "You know, if Jesus came to this village tonight, I think he'd join the crowd at the tavern rather than the crowd at the church."

And I know that existentially also, because that young man who was in the pulpit here for those early years of 1960s, oh, it is painful to remember. But, I went to Williamsburg, Virginia not so long after that and, in a tour of the colonial buildings, there was this lovely hall on a second floor in the middle of that little village restored, and the guide spoke about the fact that in this room – which was light with windows and chair stacked and here and there great barrels of wine vats, nice hardwood floor – the guide said here the social life of the community took place. There were often Saturday evening dances, he said, and then the chairs would be set up for divine worship on Sunday morning. I thought, "Bingo! The only part of that story I know is Sunday morning, because I've never danced a step, let alone a two-step, and wine never touched my lips apart from the Eucharist." I know I am not preaching to many of you. There are a few dinosaurs like me out there, but just let me get this off my chest. You can just go out of here and thank God that you didn't know that kind of repressive religious experience,

and yet I know I also speak for a good measure of religion which is in control and which, as Martin Marty says, is afraid to let us experience something of the divine madness which honors that part of our humanity which is also authentically human.

Jesus, it seems to me, had the balance right. He was accosted by the religious guardians of tradition for the fact that his disciples didn't carry on the fast. Maybe they didn't keep Lent. He said to them, "Look, you can't fast when the bridegroom is here." And then he was trying to say something new is a-birthing and you simply cannot take that which is new and cram it into old containers because it bursts the containers. And then they were going through the grain fields and the disciples picked the grain for their own need on the Sabbath, which again brought that conflict situation: why do they do that which is not lawful on the Sabbath? Jesus said there is precedent for that. The meeting of human need transcends the ritual prescription for the keeping of the Sabbath. And then he said, "Look, the Sabbath, this marvelous gift of God, has been for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath."

It is so easy in our religious observances, it is so easy for those of us who are in charge, it is so easy for us to forget that it is all for the enrichment and the enhancement of your humanity lived before the face of God. With Jesus, there was that ability to discriminate between the authentic observance and the honoring of that which was even deeper, which was authentic human need. The church doesn't live very easily with that kind of freedom because Luke and Matthew we are told followed Mark a decade or two later. Mark's gospel, that we read this morning, has that statement of Jesus, the Sabbath was made for the human, not the human for the Sabbath. When Matthew and Luke picked up that particular story, in both Matthew and Luke that statement was deleted. I think the elders got together and said, "You know what? That is just too dangerous. You can't trust the people to make that decision, and so we had better delete it."

It is a beautiful thing, really, when one can celebrate the full spectrum of being, to come in here this morning to the sounds of joy. I caught you smiling and tapping your feet because something deep down in you was being tapped, because there is something marvelous about the experience of sheer joy and delight. And then, it will be also a goose-bump experience on Wednesday evening at the opening of Lent when you will come here to a dimmed sanctuary and kneel and I will place the ashes on your forehead in the sign of the cross reminding you that dust you are and to dust you will return.

So, you see, to be honestly human is to be able on Tuesday night to have pancakes dripping with butter and sloshing with syrup, bacon deep in grease and sausage that won't quit, raise a glass and party a while, and then come here to identify with the lamb of God who loved us and gave himself for us. It is not either/or. It is both/and. That is to be honestly human. That is to be all that God intends us to

be, and when we live that way, then I suspect that increasingly with age, with wrinkles and creases, our visage will reflect joy.