

God Loves People: To Be Human is Enough

Text: Psalm 103:14; Romans 5:8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

For God knows how we were made; God remembers that we are dust. Psalm 103:14

*But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ dies for us.
Romans 5:8*

“God Loves People: To Be Human is Enough,” but it has been rather difficult for the Church to be honest with that fact because the Church is also looked to as kind of the ethical guru of society, the conservative glue to hold things together, and to keep things on the straight and narrow and to address that which is wrong with people and society.

So I think there has been a tension within the Church and the preaching in its message, afraid that if it was too warm an embrace of the sinner that it might appear to be condoning of such behavior and, therefore, there is this distancing and this body language that causes the Church to withdraw just a bit.

In the Church we have sort of kept that illusion alive that there are some good folk, and some not quite so good. The Church tends to become a society of the righteous because we do want to keep up our public image, particularly at church. And so we keep the vestments on or the mask intact, or the facade up so that it never really comes to full expression and public demonstration. But if you scratch us, I think you will find we are all pretty much the same. So there has been a tension, I think, in the open embrace of the persons who have fallen flat on their faces and gotten muddied and tarnished in the process of living. But, as a matter of fact, to the extent that we do withdraw or withhold, or keep at arms length any person in any condition, we are going contrary to the biblical message.

The biblical message is very clear “That God loves People, and to be Human is Enough.” To be human is to be a person filled with anxiety and torn with tension. That’s simply endemic to our human situation. I love Psalm 103, verses 13 and 14, the expression of the Grace of God that grants us forgiveness, and the affirmation of the compassion of God that understands us thoroughly and loves us anyway.

“God knows our frame. God remembers that we are dust. For God knows how we are formed. God remembers that we are clay.” The Psalmist, I suspect, is informed by that wonderful image in that second chapter of Genesis: the creator, the potter who scoops a handful of mud and shapes a human being and breathes into that human form the breath of life, creating a living soul. In the biblical account of creation, in the Hebrew understanding of the human person, we are linked to the earth. We are a part of this created order. We are of the earth - earthy. We speak of ourselves sometimes as “earthlings.”

That play on words conveys a truth. At a funeral yesterday at the committal I said, “Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes.” In the face of the reality of death, there is our recognition that we are not only shaped of the elements, the primal elements, that are a part of the cosmos, but we ourselves are finally dissolved again into those elements. We are of the earth. Sometimes putting ourselves down, we say we feel “cloddy.” Or looking judgmentally at another we may say, “Oh, he’s a clod, or she’s a clod.” Well, there is a bit of reality in that, for we are clods. But that is not all we are. Berkhof, in *The Christian Faith*, says there is a gravitational pull on us because, though we are a part of the earth, there is also that beckoning call from above. So, we are creatures who live in two worlds. We are part of the earth and part of that spiritual reality of God and the call of God to be in communion with God’s spirit. Harold Ellens in an article a few years ago in *Perspectives* pictured the human person as full of anxiety, which he identifies not as a consequence of our sin, but as a consequence of being human. He calls it “a generic anxiety.” It is not something that we have encumbered ourselves with because of concrete behavior, but something that simply dwells in us because we are human. He pictures vividly the fetus coming to maturity in the fullness of time, bumping and splashing down the birth canal, being brought into an alien environment, scared to death. And that, he says, characterizes us not only at the moment of our birth but throughout all our lives. We are more often scared to death than we are gargantuan villains of revolt and rebellion. We are not very heroic sinners, really. I suppose that’s why God’s first reaction to us is one of compassion.

I think that an honest biblical understanding of the human person should enable us to do what Dr. Kurtz said a moment ago, to listen more sensitively and to speak more compassionately. It should enable us to be compassionate with people, and to be compassionate with one’s self. It’s not easy to be human. To be human is to have a generic anxiety - a given with one’s humanity. There is a fragility - a vulnerability in being human. There is the limited nature of our human existence, the fact that we are always called to make judgments and make decisions on the basis of limited knowledge and insight. We have to decide about things for which we don’t have sufficient data. And we are unable to extricate ourselves for a moment from this human scene in order that we might get a perspective on it. There are those who claim to see things as God sees them, but I’ve never been sure they are right. Our judgments are always human. We are always limited. We live a fragile existence. And finally, we die.

There is an inherent anxiety in being human. And I suspect that's why God has mercy on us. The Psalmist says God never forgets that fact. After all, we are created by God and God doesn't forget the "stuff" with which he (or she) is working. That's good news. That ought to give us some encouragement for ourselves and some compassion one for another. Paul writes in the fifth chapter of Romans, in this context, where he speaks about the demonstration of God's love being precisely in the fact that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." In that context, Paul describes us with two different words. One is he speaks of us as being weak or impotent. It was while we were in our weakness and our impotence that the initiative of God was taken to come with redeeming grace. Weakness. Impotence.

And then a little later he speaks of our hostility or enmity with God. And those two words characterize our human situation very well. Impotence and hostility. Have you ever known a hostile person? You say you are married to one. (Laughter) Or maybe for a brief stint an adolescent growing up in your home manifests a bit of hostility. I sure hope you don't work for one. Hostile people are not easy to live with. Hostile people are dealing with some stuff that they may be aware of or they may be unaware of. The most dangerous ones are those who have no self-awareness at all - who don't realize the pot or the cauldron that boils deep in their gut. But it manifests itself in hostility. And you know the great generator of hostility - impotence, occurs when we feel powerless. It makes us angry. We become hostile. We strike out. Paul says that is a portrait of a sinner. No great, dramatic, tragic villain here, just a powerless, hostile person. Paul says for such persons Christ died. To such people God comes with grace and in compassion provides the healing that empowers and reconciles.

In his book, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, (If I get it in ten times in this sermon, I get 10% on all copies sold in the next six months.) (Laughter) Dr. Kurtz makes a very significant distinction - a distinction between spirituality and therapy. The end of therapy is explanation. The end of spirituality is forgiveness. We need both. We need explanation. We've been short on explanation in the Church. I ream you out for all of your fallibilities, failures, fickleness, faithlessness and what have you, and then say "Repent or perish." And, of course, you do neither. But you get your back up. Who likes to be addressed that way? The problem is that you don't even understand what's going on. We've been short on explanations. So we have driven a lot of faithful people out of the Church. People have said, "Something is going on, but I don't understand it," and they've found a couch somewhere and a psychiatrist. There, they find explanation. Explanation illumines, but by itself it doesn't heal, because, when we have received all the light that is possible on the subject, what we still need to hear is, "You are forgiven."

Forgiveness is necessary for that for which there is no explanation and no excuse. We are anxious. We are scared to death. We feel our emptiness and we strike out in hostility. It is helpful to get a handle on why. It is healing to know that God in

grace forgives us. In fact, has forgiven us already. As “far as the east is from the west so far has God removed our transgressions from us....as high as the heaven is from the earth, so great is His mercy to those who stand in awe.” The Bible is replete with many such beautiful images. God, it says, has blotted out our sin. Like a thick cloud, God has cast it behind God’s back. God has buried it in the depths of the sea.

The story was told of Jim who got to heaven one day and fell down at Jesus’ feet and said, “Oh, Lord Jesus, thank you, thank you for forgiving all my sin.” And Jesus looked at him and said, “What sin?” Now that’s good news. It is all because God loves people, and “To be Human is Enough.” And from what I know of you folks, you’re human, all too human. And God loves you!

Reference:

Ernest Kurtz, Katherine Ketcham. *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*. Bantam, reprint edition, 1993.