

### *What are Human Beings?*

During the last presidential election, I developed what I called the “bunny rabbit policy.” I know it’s absolutely ridiculous; it sounds like an episode of The Big Bang Theory, but bear with me, I think you might agree we are going to need it soon...

My love-hate relationship with Social Media is pretty well known - I have already shared with you that I left social media once, but concluded that withdrawing from the common discourse is not a productive solution to disagreements. That said, I still pretty deeply dislike seeing people’s over-sharing and airing their dirty laundry or their political grievances. It was this last one that led to the bunny rabbit policy. This is what the bunny rabbit policy looks like: when I reach the point that I feel that I absolutely, positively must vent my righteous indignation – I don’t. Let me explain.

I posted an opinion. A friend replied. Our politics are not the same – at all - but it doesn’t matter because we’re still friends - between us it was a funny poke back and forth sort of light-hearted joke that you can do when you’re in the same room, or the same city.

Then, a third party, a friend but not a close friend, proceeded to eviscerate the first friend.

I was nothing short of horrified. I deleted the thread and said instead, “From now on, I am not posting anything but pictures of puppy dogs, unicorns and rainbows that way there will be no more casualties in my social media.”

I supposed that is still withdrawal from the common discourse in a way, but friends, we are allowed to have an unpublished thought.

The first response was someone objecting to rainbows.

The next was the observation that unicorns have some vaguely sexual connotation.

Finally, someone noted that I was favoring puppy dogs over kitty cats, and what did I have against cat people anyhow?

After many rounds of mock-outrage, it was decided that a bunny rabbit should be sufficiently inoffensive. I waited until the next time I saw something that was, to my mind, bone-headed and instead of commenting, I put a rabbit on it.

It felt good. I invite you to embrace this lowly cottontail in our common discourse.

It sounds silly, and of course it is, but here’s the underlying reason: in that first moment when I saw someone being ugly to a friend of mine in a public venue, I was done with it. I decided then and there that there wasn’t a political or personal viewpoint that I needed to share that was worth more than my friends.

That’s not to say there’s nothing worth fighting for, *it is to say there’s a way to have that fight.*

When it comes to what really matters, we can express our beliefs in ways that enhance our humanity or in ways that diminish our humanity.

That is true of more than political speech and religious convictions as well.

When it comes to the way that we live in our marriages or partnerships, we can live in ways that enhance our humanity or in ways that diminish our humanity.

When it comes to how we conduct ourselves in business, we can enhance our humanity or diminish it.

Being human is God's gift to us.

Let me say that again: being *human* is God's gift to us.

One of my theological pet-peeves is when I see humanity being diminished. That happens when humanity is used as an excuse for inhuman, or inhumane behavior. You've heard it done, I'm sure, and it typically goes like this: I'm only human.

Maybe you've said it:

"I am afraid I blew a gasket when PECO or Comcast painted all over our new sidewalk. Well, you're only human." (I didn't, but I considered it.)

"I can't believe we ate that whole cheesecake! Well, we're only human."

"Does God really mind if I fudge just the teensiest bit on my 1099 income? Come on, you'd have to be superhuman not to do that!"

You see where this is going?

It is the use of humanity as an excuse for bad behavior.

Our humanity isn't what makes us do bad things. Being human is what God *created* us to be. Sin is what makes us do bad things.

The problem with all those examples is that they confuse being human with being a sinner.

Human beings *are* sinners, but that isn't what makes us human, because sin is what diminishes humanity.

I am aware that sin is generally an unpopular topic.

Do you remember Robert Schuller? He was a televangelist who sort of took over the mantle of Norman Vincent Peale, of *The Power of Positive Thinking* fame. I remember seeing his *Hour of Power* broadcasts from the Crystal Cathedral on television when I was a kid. Well, some years ago, I worked with a minister who knew him well, and he pointed out to me that any reference to *sin* was, particularly in the later years, edited out of the service.

What a difference from our forebears.

Cornelius Plantinga observes how our understanding of sin has changed in recent years. "The awareness of sin used to be our shadow. Christians hated sin, feared it, fled from it, grieved over it. Some of our grandparents agonized over their sins. A man who lost his temper

might wonder whether he could still go to Holy Communion. A woman who for years envied her more attractive and intelligent sister might worry that this sin threatened her very salvation. But the shadow has dimmed. Nowadays the accusation *you have sinned* is often said with a grin, and with a tone that signals an inside joke.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, my friend Tom Long penned an article some years back that captures the heart of the matter, using the ancient confession of sin. It’s title was, “Lord Be Merciful to Me, A Miscalculator.”

No, we do not do the thing that we wish we had not because we are *human*. We do it because we are *sinners*.

To be human means to be *limited*, but it does not mean to be *bad*. And so we are clear, to be a sinner does not mean we are bad. It means we are broken and in need of healing. Indeed, at the ancient council of Chalcedon in 451, the humanity of Jesus was lifted up as a good thing, not to be ignored or diminished but to be embraced. That Jesus Christ is fully human is to be *celebrated*. Indeed, the Chalcedonian formula that Jesus is fully human and fully divine embraces the reality that to be human is to be fully and completely as God created us to be. It is a *good* thing to be human!

We misunderstand our humanity if we think it is our sin that defines us. So, don’t diminish your humanity! It is a gift!

It’s also important to remember we can only diminish our own humanity, we can’t diminish anyone else’s. One of the great gifts of born out of the language of the Civil Rights Movement and the Equality movement is the knowledge that what someone calls you does not define you. What *you* call someone doesn’t define them. Humanity is defined by God, and it is given by God.

Why does our perception of our humanity matter so much? *Because God sees being human as good thing.*

Do you know that? I mean, do you know that at a deep level? God sees being human as a good thing! God made you to be you! God delights in the particularity of *you*!

Listen to the Psalmist: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.”

That is what it means to be human to God. To be a little lower than God and crowned with glory and honor.

Is that how you think of yourself?

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Not The Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin. (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995) p.xi

Is that how you of the person, with dirt on their clothes and matted hair, yelling obscenities at you on Walnut Street, as I encountered last week? In God's eyes, that person is crowned with glory and honor!

God knows sin is real! Trust me when I tell you that, in fact, God does know whether fudge your 1099 income or not, and God *does* know if you're sneaking around cheating on your spouse, and God *does* know if you're getting beaten down, and God *does* know if you look in the mirror and call yourself names, and God *does* know if you cut yourself emotionally or physically, or if somebody else is telling you things that make you think you're less than human.

God knows sin is real. But God's grace is always more real.

And even though we can't stop being sinners, God still thinks we're crowned with glory and honor, can you believe that? Why would we ever treat ourselves otherwise?

And God doesn't dismiss sin, God addresses sin.

That's the heart of the good news of the Gospel: God knew that sin was real and hurtful and God didn't just ignore it, God *did* something about it.

To be human is to be made in the image of God. Male and female alike, according to Genesis, made in the image of God.

Classically, the language of the Trinity is *Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*. Just a note about gendered language: the gender is not the important part; the relationship is the important part. That is why I don't use pronouns when I write about God. If it's a quote, like the Aaronic benediction I use of the service, I let it stand, but otherwise I avoid the pronouns. But the classical language of the trinity is still important, not because I believe God has a gender identity, but because it preserves the nature of *relationship* as the quality that defines it. Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer reflect activities. But familial language reflects relationship, and we are baptized into that relationship. God's definition of self is mutual, relational, and loving. That is who God is, and God made us in God's image.

And then, out of the overflowing of God's love, God made creation and put us in it, to be together, crowned with glory and honor.

And of course, you know the story: We messed it up, so God took on our human identity and fixed it in the most costly way imaginable: God took on our sin.

This is where it matters that we know what it means to be human. To safeguard us from our own sin, God took it on. The cross of Jesus Christ, with all its cosmos-shattering implications in the very being of God who is complete in love and yet goes down to ignominious death is the place where our understanding fails, because we are limited. But we can know that it is grace. It is love. It is God's unfailing reliability.

So, maybe we don't excuse our sins saying, "I'm only human."

Maybe, let's say instead, "I want to do better."

And perhaps we could think of grace and peace abounding, the way God wants it. I have a friend who signs her emails, "Grace all over."

Isn't that great! It's the heart of the Gospel: there's grace all over.

It reminds me of a favorite quote of mine,

"The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It is for you I created the universe. I love you."<sup>2</sup>

A little lower than God, crowned with glory and honor, that is who you are.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC. (HarperOne, San Francisco, 1993) p39