

“LOST IN GRACE”

a sermon on Exodus 3:1-15, Romans 12:9-21, and Matthew 16:21-28
September 3, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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“Humans.” Scientifically, “*homo sapiens*” – part of the “genus” of “bipedal primates.” Who are we, really? Some would question our scientific classification, arguing that we really are not “animals,” in the sense that we have very much “in common” with other creatures. And they would seek to draw *distinctions* between humans and all other forms of life on this planet, questioning whether *other* creatures *think* as we do, or *feel* as we do, or *communicate* as we do. And yet as science progresses, we are finding that many animals possess at least the *rudiments* of thought, and feeling, and communication.

Those findings “threaten” some people, who want to *insist* that we humans are of a different *kind* than the birds of the air, or the “beasts” of the field. And I think I know why.

It is *easier* to “be human,” if to be human means simply to be born a certain way: to “possess” an “essential humanness” by virtue of birth. Humanity, then, is then something we can take for granted . . . and it is something that cannot be *taken away* from us. It is an “entitlement.” We are “different.” Unique, among the creatures of this world.

But the creation narrative really doesn’t put it that way. True, according to Genesis one, we humans are created in God’s very “image.” But in Genesis two, the description of our creation says that God formed us out of “dust of the ground” – the very *same* dust out of which God “made . . . to grow every tree that is good for food,” and every other living creature. And then it says that God “breathed into [us] the breath of life” – the very same *breath* that is in every other “living, breathing” creature.

I am not saying that there are not, in fact, *differences* between humans and other living creatures. But I am suggesting that the *primary* difference is a matter of *potential*; that is, I believe the Scriptures proclaim that “humanness” is something we can either *develop*, or thoroughly *ignore* in life.

God has created us with the *ability* to be human — to *develop* our humanity, if we choose. Or to put it another way, when we are born, we are born as “creatures” of this earth. We are “created” just as any other creature is created — according to biological realities.

And before we go on, that reality about “the human creature” is not in itself a *bad* thing. When God created the world and everything in it, after all, God proclaimed it *good*. So in the first place, we can simply acknowledge that we have a “physical” existence, like that of any *other* creature, which is, just as it is for all other creatures, a *gift* from God, and a gift for which we should be grateful *to* God. The gift of life.

But our simple, “physical” state is *also* what the Biblical writers eventually call the “state of corruption.” It doesn’t *last*. Dust eventually becomes dust again. And even more, our “corruptible state,” if we allow it to *dominate* us, leads to a frenzied, shallow life, where our goal is simply to “remain alive” as long as possible, to “possess” life, indeed to *hoard* life, selfishly focusing on its *preservation*.

That is the basic human state — the state into which each of us (and for that matter, every living creature, is born. And it is the state of being our particular branch of Christendom calls “total depravity.” It means the state of knowing and caring only about the physical side of our existence. And it is the state described by the Psalmist who wrote, “The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any that act wisely, that seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike *corrupt*; there is none that does good, no, not one.”

The point is, God has implanted in us the *potential* for more than that, and so truly *being* human means developing that potential.

The Psalmist called it *wisdom*. My own favorite word is “soul.” Either way, it means the human *ability* to “interpret” the physical realm and make *sense* of it. It means developing “perspective” — learning to see ourselves in the larger “scheme of things.” Discovering that there is something more than just our existence. Something lasting. Something eternal.

That is what makes us human. The ability to *transcend* the physical, to not be *bound* by the limits of our present existence — to *dream* of a better world, and to see ourselves as somehow “connected” to the process of bringing it about.

Our Gospel reading this morning comes from the days toward the end of Jesus' ministry, when he was trying to help the disciples come to terms with what was about to take place in Jerusalem, and so he "he began to show them," it says, "that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

That was not at all what they wanted to hear. And who can blame them? Who would want to hear that their beloved teacher and leader, a person they greatly respected, and to whom they were very *loyal*, was about to *allow* himself to be arrested, and tortured, and die?

But Jesus' words to the disciples cut to the heart of our humanity. "Whoever would save his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." And then even more powerfully: "for what will it *profit* a man if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his life?"

The word translated "life" in that passage (in the New Revised Standard Version) is the Greek word, *ψυχή*. It is more often translated, "soul." For instance, it is the word Jesus used when he quoted the first, greatest commandment: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and *soul*, and mind. And even more to the point, it is the word he used when he said, "do not fear those who kill the *body* but cannot kill the *soul*."

Clearly, the word *ψυχή* refers to something *other than*, and *apart from* "physical existence."

". . . what will it *profit* a man if he gains the whole world, [but] forfeits his *soul*?"

The point is, we humans have been endowed by our Creator with the ability to do *more* than just "gain the world." And it is a very good thing that we have, because people – the *very* people – who have gained the most of the world will tell you that it just isn't enough . . . that no matter how much we "accumulate," there is still something missing.

It is so very *easy*, in this life, to end up as Harry Emerson Fosdick described in his great hymn: "rich in *things*, but *poor* in soul."

Our television screens have been filled, this past week, with images of loss. Literally *hundreds* of thousands in Texas and elsewhere in the path of hurricane Harvey have suffered losses. In some cases, losses of life. In many others, losses of “things.”

But they have *also* been filled with images of heroism, of strength, of unity, and of selflessness – of those qualities that both bring us together as human creatures, and help us transcend our current lot.

Despite the pain and suffering, and the losses which will be measured in *billions* of dollars and require some sacrifice on *all* our parts, ultimately, I think – and I *hope* – our nation became a bit richer in *soul* this week, a bit more truly *human*. God knows, we needed it.

“Whoever would *save* his life,” Jesus said, “will lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake will *find* it.”

That is the essential “re-ordering” that each of us has to undertake, in our process of Christian growth and nurture. Each of us is born totally self-consumed, into a purely *physical* existence. But along the way, as a result of our nurture in the faith, the love and care of our parents, the guidance of God, and a host of other influences, we learn to turn outward. We begin to see the needs of *others*, and to recognize that we bear a certain responsibility for *their* needs, and not just our own . . . simply because we are a *part* of the human race.

The great *opportunity* of our humanity — of “*being* human” — is the opportunity to *transcend* ourselves, to “lose” ourselves, as another hymn writer put it, “in wonder, love, and praise.” Losing ourselves into the larger fellowship of the community of faith and its *mission* in the world is a very *enriching* process. And in so doing, Jesus promised, we will truly *find* ourselves.

There is a “leap of faith” required in that process, which is where the disciples fell short at first. But God is patient, and full of grace. In fact, that is a good way to put it. Jesus calls us to “lose” ourselves . . . in *grace*, to *place* ourselves in God’s hands: to *do* what is right, and to *turn* outward, and to *trust* in God’s promises.

That is the goal of human life. That is what it *means* to be truly human, and to have what Jesus called, “abundant life.” It doesn’t just “happen.” It is a lifelong process. But God is patient, and full of grace.

Live in that grace. *Lose* yourself in it, and you will *find* life — *true* life, the life and the work God has given you to do. And in that life you will find also your *humanity*, and your *salvation*.

May God guide you in that journey, and bring you the joy that comes from *being* human, and *losing* yourself in God's grace.

To God be the glory now and always.