

## WHAT'S A HUMAN FOR?

Texts on Sunday, January 26, 2020

Philippians 3:10-16; Matthew 5: 43-48

We are so divided, they say. Blue and red, conservative and liberal, urban and rural pulled under separate enclaves like twelve-year old boys and girls at the edges of a dance floor; opposing sides never speaking. Laid on this story of division, of course, are some heart-warming ones about this town that is managing a spirit of comity, or that organization hosting hard conversations. But the big scheme the media have latched onto is that all of us are guilty of contributing to social disorder because we stay so stuck in our own minds, in our own tribes, unwilling to listen or learn, or to see the other's side.

This scheme sells. It is easy to explain and easy to demonstrate, for hard-hearted warriors are everywhere willing to defend their cause. Also, this scheme of division makes it easy for the reporters to keep a mask on as they report on the disease from the field. To be sure, millions of humans across all time and all the globe are only kind to their own kind. And all of us have selfish tendencies. (If we hadn't we'd have died in the day we didn't scream for mother's milk.) And all of us have gotten gravely greedy with someone and hurt them hard. And, as we say, millions transfer their inner selfishness onto their family, their team . . . church, party, nation. Of course there are tribes.

But this media scheme of all division, all the time, everyone in their corner, fails to grasp what a human is for. Selfishness and tribalism are ways humans deal more or less ignorantly with existential fears, and if that is the human way, as the media scheme has it, then to hell with us all; we are not different from hyenas or zebras—we're just in it for ourselves and for our kind.

But if I want the vote extended to every citizen, and you want to prevent many from voting so your party always wins, then you are in a tribe, but I am not. If I work so that those accused of crimes get a fair trial and humane treatment if they are in the jail, and you don't care if they suffer horribly for the rest of their lives, then you are in a tribe; I am not. If I minimize the wrongs done by the top man because I want him in power, but you want every leader held to account according to the law, then I am in a tribe and you are not. If I call asylum-seekers at the border "invaders" and say they deserve their pain and squalor, then I am a tribalist. If you back fair treatment for anyone, though they may have crossed the line without papers, and if you encourage international solutions to the crises which cause migration and which migration causes, though the cost to your own nation is not small, yes, you are a citizen of your nation, but you are not in a tribe.

The criterion at work here is clear. What separates the tribal from the non-tribal mind is this. If you value—or yearn to value—every person as a child of God, then you are not part of a tribe. You might say the whole human race is your tribe, which is no tribe at all. If you long to see in every face the face of God, that is—: all the colors, all the abilities, all the classes, all the religions, all ages, all the nations, all the gendered ways, all the parties, all states of mind, even the tribe-minded who fight you and hate and revile you. If your goal is to grow so much that you can see and understand, even love, some whom you have not seen and loved, you are not in a tribe.

This word “tribe,” in the narrow way we are using it, has nothing to do with ethnicity. Judah was one of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the name “Jew” first meant “of the tribe of Judah.” But no Jew is tribal in the narrow sense because of birth. By contrast, anyone who hates Jews is tribal. “Tribal” in this sense means ideological. It means being more committed to my ideas of what and who is right than to your well-being.

But can this be what a human is for? We know what a thing is for—scissors, or a table, or a jet. If you own some complex thing—a sewing machine or a computer, say—but you never use its top functions, well, won't you agree that you don't really know what it's for, since you haven't used it to full capacity? It's the same with your complex human functions. If you only use your human nature to eat and sleep and work and chat with your people and enjoy entertainments, then you are not using your self according to the design capacity. You don't really know what you are for. Not yet.

You were designed with the power to love, even to love your enemy! Yes, you have that function. If you didn't, Jesus' command to love would be sadistic. But you do have this power to love. If you only love those who love you, says Jesus, well, come on, everyone does that, even the animals. But we are human—not “only human,” but human, supplied with the take-up-our-cross-and-follow function. It's right there, ready for use. We have the lay-down-my-life-for-others function. We have the first-shall-be-last function. If we don't use our high-level functions, we just don't know what we're good for.

By way of excuse for wrongs done and errors, people often say, “I'm only human” or “Nobody's perfect”—as if perfection were the standard. Of course that's not it. Still, how shall we make sense of Jesus' words from the Mount? Here he says, “Love your enemies” and a moment later, “Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Is perfect the standard?

A sermon usually steers around teaching the actual ancient words of the Bible, but in this case it matters to know what the English word “perfect” is

translating. The Greek word is “teleios.” Everywhere else this word is used in the Bible, it is translated—not “perfect,” but—“mature.” Why? Because the word comes from “telos,” which means purpose or goal. To be teleios means to be turned toward your goal. We call fruit mature when it is sweet on the branch and ready to drop to the ground and nourish its seeds to life. For fruit, that’s mature because more life is its goal, its telos.

What is the telos for the human? What’s a human for? Just more of our kind, our tribe? No, but to love our enemies, even as God loves. Be mature! Turn toward your goal, even as God is ever turned toward God’s goal. That’s what Jesus’ saying really says.

The apostle Paul uses this word teleios a great deal. “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death . . . Not that I have already reached the goal,” he says—and there it is—teleiomai, the verb for reaching the goal, like a runner at the finish line. He says he has not reached it, is not perfected—“but I press on toward the goal (telos) for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ.” And in the very next sentence, we read, “Let those of us who are mature—who are teleioi, turned toward the goal—be of the same mind.” Those who have the mind of Christ, the love of Christ. Yes you can. Si, se puede. Become human. Go toward your goal. Grow in the love of God. That’s what a human is for. Every other goal is a lesser god or an idol.

Now, any who are becoming mature in Christ know that Christian faith does not control the sole path to God and spiritual growth. All the great traditions are turned to this goal. The Old Testament, Greek philosophy, Buddha, the Bhagavad Gita, Confucius, the Qu’ran—in all of them, the highest human purpose is set at self-surrender and learning to turn from fearful, selfish thought and action toward faith, hope, and love. This grace is everywhere.

Alas, so also is narcissism and fear. Among the adherents of every religion, huge numbers make an idol of their God and condemn outsiders of all kinds. The Christian church has stained every century with narcissistic acts of fear and hatred. Spiritual immaturity abounds. Its effects are at work in powerful, dangerous ways today in the USA. It would be naïve to ignore or forget that immature, narcissistic tribal minds can form into murderous mobs when their worst fears are outfitted with police and armies.

How then shall the mature—who know what a human is for—consider and relate to the immature? I will leave you with some thoughts about the strange calling of a Christian into a world of tribes.

First, acknowledge that you yourself were once immature, fearful, selfish. You did not become mature by your own strength or cleverness. You were cared for, you were brought up and given graces not your own. You are God's. So is every one. The peculiar difference between the mature and the immature is that the mature know they have not attained their goal, while the immature are sure they are already standing on the right side. But remember. Once you were immature. As Paul put it, you "spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child." But as you became mature, you put an end to childish ways. Therefore, we are all together. The tribal minded do not know this, but in the mind of Christ, you know this.

Second, compassion for the tribal-minded is required. They do not know what a human is for, not yet, but from the pattern of the lives of the mature, they may learn. As Rev. John Watson put it long ago, remember that

This man beside us also has a hard fight with an un-favoring world, with strong temptations, with doubts and fears, with wounds of the past which . . . smart when they are touched. . . . And when this occurs to us we are moved to deal kindly with him, to bid him be of good cheer, to let him understand that we are also fighting a battle; we are bound not to press hard upon him nor [irritate] his lower self. [From the section "Courtesy"]

Finally, gird yourselves to struggle on behalf of all God's children. Having no tribe to which you are unthinkingly loyal does not mean holding no values, having no vision for peace and justice, making no claims on those who hold power in your societies, small or large. Exactly the opposite. If you have no tribe, if you know what a human is for—for all!—then you are freer than others to pursue righteousness and justice at whatever cost to yourself. Turn toward your goal, even as your Father in heaven is turned to the goal, and fight. This is what a human is for.

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