



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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On Human Nature

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The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away (Matthew 13:24-25).

I did not have a chance to take in much of what was said in the funeral services for the late President Bush, but I did hear Jon Meacham, a Bush biographer and our first speaker at Town Hall South this fall, sum up the standards that amounted to a code of life for Mr. Bush. They were: “Tell the truth. Don’t blame people. Be strong. Do your best. Try hard. Forgive. Stay the course.” Those are principles we would all do well to live by.

Presidents are judged by what they do and the way they live. In that respect, they’re like the rest of us, except that their lives and actions become the stuff of biography and history. Some people may like their policies, others will disagree. But whatever differences people have over policies, we also take note of character, and almost everyone said of the first President Bush that he was a gentleman, a fundamentally decent man.

In the last few weeks, we’ve had occasion nationally and right here at Westminster to think about human nature – about the good things people do, and the bad things, and how conduct relates to character. This Advent season, with Christmas coming soon, is a good time to reflect on the things we do and why we do them, because human nature is much of what Jesus Christ comes to redeem. To know more fully who we are is to see more clearly why we need Jesus.

I often hear people talk as though they think there are two different kinds of human beings: good people and bad people. Some who think this way are inclined to imagine that, while good people may occasionally do something bad, most of the really bad things done in this world are done by bad people. They get confused, then, when somebody they thought was a good person appears to have done something truly bad. At first they may refuse to believe it, and try to blame the wrongdoing on somebody else. But when the evidence becomes clear enough to cut through every sort of denial, they suffer a crisis of categories. How could a good person do such bad things? Was he really a bad person all along?

It's not hard to see why we humans are inclined to binary thinking, to lumping everyone and everything into either/or buckets of Black and White, Good and Bad, Us and Them. It's so much easier that way. We don't have to spend the time and energy it takes to understand the nuances in people or situations. The ugly polarization and tribalism of our time are at least partly the result of people's willingness to settle for simplicity instead of the truth. In the real world, truth is often more complicated than the convenient categories we try to cram it into.

But Christianity is all about trying to understand and follow the truth. Jesus himself says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." The truth for us is not just an abstract ideal but a Person. To be a Christian, to be devoted to Christ, is to be devoted to the truth, and to follow the truth wherever it – wherever he – might lead.

A Christian understanding of human nature is far more subtle than the simple notion of good people vs. bad

people. No one understood the complexity of human nature more than the man we call St. Paul. We don't call him "Saint" because he was perfect, as if he lived a life of uncomplicated devotion. On the contrary, St. Paul was a deeply messed up man. He tells us:

I don't understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Some people read Paul and conclude that he was an especially sick soul, but Christians who dare to look deeply into the darkest corners of our own souls know what Paul means. We see ourselves in the conflict he describes. We know our uglier impulses, the things we try to lock away in the basement of our hearts, but they try to come out and rob our lives of joy and peace.

Some people find Paul annoying, not least because he says he isn't the only one in this predicament. In fact, he says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." He doesn't mean that some people are bad but even the good people occasionally tell a fib or lose their temper or say naughty words – peccadillos that show they're not perfect, but aren't really all that serious. That's not what Paul means. He means that human nature is deeply messed up, laced through and through with what the Bible calls sin. We all have, competing within us, good impulses and bad. And while the mix may be different for each of us, it's a constant struggle to cultivate the better angels of our nature and rein in the ugly and destructive ones.

This notion of human nature – this moral anthropology, as theologians call it – is hardly unique to Paul. Jesus talks a lot about it, though mostly in the form of parables designed to slip past our self-justifying defenses.

So Jesus tells a famous parable about two brothers. One is a conventionally conspicuous sinner who runs out and ruins his life in riotous living while his elder brother stays home and stew, dutifully doing his chores but consumed with the self-righteousness he mistakes for virtue. The father loves both of his boys, but each of them needs their father's forgiveness.

Then there's a parable about the Pharisee who stands and prays in the temple, "Oh God, I thank you that I am not like other men – not like this tax collector or some other poor sinner" Jesus says it's the penitent tax collector, not the smug Pharisee, who goes home justified in God's eyes, because he confesses his sins while the other claims he has no need of forgiveness.

Jesus tells yet another parable, about the weeds and the wheat. A planter sows good seed, expecting it to produce a great harvest, but then an enemy comes at night and sows weeds among the wheat to choke off the harvest. When the field hands ask whether they should try to pull out the weeds, the planter says, "No, let them all grow until harvest time, and then we'll separate the weeds from the wheat."

When, as usual, Jesus' disciples ask for clarification about the parable, he says some of what will be gathered up and thrown into the fire will be the evildoers, those who really turn out to be children of the evil one. But that's not all.

Jesus also says that “all causes of sin” will be sorted out and burned. That’s another way of saying that the line between good and evil runs not only between individuals but also down the middle of every human heart. There are things in every one of us that will need to be sorted out and gathered up and burned away before we’re fit for the kingdom of heaven. Our task in this life is to seek God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s power to strengthen the good in us and weaken the bad, so that, come harvest time, there will be more wheat than weeds for Christ to collect.

We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. When Paul says that, he’s not making some excessively pessimistic claim about human nature; he’s simply observing what anyone who pays attention knows to be true. Some people’s sin is of the younger brother’s type in Jesus’ parable: obvious things like stealing, hurting people physically and emotionally, committing adultery, and so on. Other people’s sin is mostly the elder brother’s kind: the sort of vanity or pride that’s keenly aware of other people’s faults but oblivious to the log that blinds them to their own. There are sins of commission and sins of omission, and any time we acquiesce in injustice, or remain indifferent to other people’s suffering, or fail to be good stewards of this world and its resources, we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Then the distinction between good people and bad people becomes a lot less clear.

Christianity is powerful, not only spiritually but also psychologically. It gives us a realistic view of human nature, one that’s neither naively optimistic nor depressingly pessimistic.

God is not surprised by any of the awful things human beings do. God never texts “OMG.” As the psalmist says, “He knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.” Scripture says that God had a plan for our redemption, even before the foundation of the world. God never has to go to Plan B. The original plan, giving us a will that’s free to love or not to love, and therefore free enough also to sin, included from the beginning a way to save us through the person and work of Christ. The power of our faith includes the courage to acknowledge our own sin clearly and confess it, because we know that our confession is met not with the condemnation but with God’s grace and the power to make us a new creation.

Westminster people know that a member of our community has hurt the church by stealing, for reasons fully known, perhaps, only to God. We’re making every effort, within the church and through law enforcement, to hold the individual accountable and redeem the situation and prevent it from ever happening again. But just last week, if you were here, you heard Dr. Wallace, whose visit was planned months ago, thank the congregation for our partnership with his church and their work, and with so many others in our community, in the city, and around the world. For more than seventy years, Westminster has been a source of hope and comfort and caring, not only for the thousands of people who have gathered here, but for countless others with whom we’ve shared resources in grateful response to the calling of Christ.

This is the season when we make year-end contributions to the church’s work and pledge our support for ministry and mission in the coming year. We need to hear from all of our members, especially now. It would be a

shame if anyone decided to respond to the hurt one person caused by hurting the church even more, withholding support and undermining our ability to care for people in the congregation and in the world around us.

Our faith teaches that the world is not made up so much of good people and bad people as complicated human beings, within all of whom are competing impulses to right and wrong, good and evil. While we always want to hold one another, and ourselves, accountable, Christmas reminds us that we need Jesus to redeem our fallen nature. As the psalmist said three thousand years ago:

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits – who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy

All of this brings us back to where we began, with the reminder that our mixed up, fallen nature points to our need for principles to live by. At one level, those principles are pretty simple: “Tell the truth. Don’t blame people. Be strong. Do your best. Try hard. Forgive. Stay the course.” At a deeper level, we’re driven back to our fundamental reliance upon God: “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him: as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.”

The Bible declares that God is in Christ, reconciling the world to God, and all of us to one another. That’s why we look forward to the coming of Christ – not only to redeem this whole world, but to bring light and hope and joy and peace into the deepest recesses of our own souls.



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