

“Core Christianity”
“Rightfully Assessing Human Nature”

This sermon series is on the basic beliefs at the heart of Christianity. Last week we looked at the question: What do Christians believe about God? Today we will focus on the question: What does the Christian faith say about man? How does it assess human nature? Are we humans basically good? Bad? Something in between? What can we realistically expect from human nature?

This may sound like an abstract, philosophical question, but it really has practical implications. It raises questions like: Can I trust myself, and those around me, to be sensible and rational? Are people basically good, and becoming more moral and humane as time goes on? Or, are we evil and in need of limitations and controls on our behavior? If I'm dating or thinking of marriage, is this person I'm in love with a special angel, or someone who gets moody and selfish like so many other people I know? With Obama leaving the White House and a Republicans administration taking over, can we expect a pleasant turnabout? Or, was Studdert-Kennedy right when he quipped: “When you change the Government, do remember that you only take one lot of sinners out and put another lot of sinners in”? What can I realistically expect of my children, my parents, my friends, myself?

What is man? What is the Christian view of human nature? Before we look at what the Bible says about human nature, let me comment briefly on several of the prevailing views in our culture.

One is the rationalistic (or idealistic) view of man. This perspective exalts our capacity to think and reason. It claims that we can be trusted to act with wisdom and good sense. There is some truth in this. We humans have produced marvelous inventions and astounding technology. We can think and reason in ways other creatures cannot (e.g. it would take a group of chimpanzees a long time to design and manufacture a new minivan!).

Yet this view *overestimates* human potential. Events of the last century have demonstrated that man's reasoning ability is not dependable. Isis fanatics blowing themselves and others up in the name of their god...Congress' inability to compromise and get anything done...Hillary Clinton's use of her private email server for classified government information and Donald Trump's careless mocking of Carly Fiorina's looks...lending institutions giving home loans to thousands who couldn't afford it, fueling the stock market plunge of 2008. All of these raise doubts about how trustworthy human reasoning is.

Who of us has not stood by while a friend or family member has done something stupid and irrational, and we are left to think, “Whatever got into him/her?” How often have *we ourselves* wound up doing the evil our reason rejects? All humans

seem to have this innate tendency to throw common sense to the winds and follow compulsively our desire for food, drink, sex, power, possessions.

Another current view of human nature is *the humanistic view of man*. *Secular humanism* has seeped into the fabric of our culture today. In this view, *human beings*, not *God*, are the center of existence. "Man is the measure of all things", as Protagoras once said. Many who hold to this view believe human nature is basically good, and human progress is inevitable. Some years ago a group of students at Cambridge University formed the Cambridge Humanist Society. A news clipping said, "The Society's premise is that human problems can, and must, be faced in terms of human intellectual and moral resources *without invoking supernatural authority*" (i.e. leave God out!). This is the way many people think today. We humans have it within ourselves to solve all the world's problems and create a brave new world. The question is, however: *Are we progressing toward a brave new world? Are we any better now than we were 100 years ago?* One glance at the newspaper headlines on an ordinary day might suggest a "no" answer to the above questions.

I believe the rationalist view, and the secular humanist view, both fall short of accurately describing who and what we are as human beings.

What is the Christian view of human nature? According to the Bible, human nature is ambiguous – an explosive mix of good and evil. If ever there were a classic "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" case, it is us! Brimming with courage and noble aspirations...yet pathetically perverse!

On the one hand, we are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." We are created unique from all other created things. We have the potential to relate to God in ways no other of God's creatures can. Psalm 8 portrays this exalted view of man. "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; 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" (Genesis 8:3-6). We are made "a little lower than God", crowned with glory and honor! We are created to rule over the beasts of the field and birds of the air and fish of the sea!

And because we are created in God's image we have breathtaking potential as human beings: at times we soar to the heights with incredibly good deeds and unselfish actions; we use our minds and hands to create marvelous things; we act with courage and heroism, in self-sacrificing ways.

But the Bible also says that human nature has suffered a catastrophe. I still remember that fateful day in January, 1986, on a beautiful, but cold, morning in Florida. The space shuttle Challenger lifted off and rose majestically from the earth. But just over a minute later something happened. The technician describing the flight, in a kind of matter-of-fact voice, made the announcement: “Major malfunction”. Major malfunction! What a classic understatement! The whole thing had blown up!

Well, there has been a “major malfunction” with human nature! The Bible calls it “sin”. Theologians use phrases like “the Fall” or “original sin”. Unless we take this seriously, I don’t think we can truly understand human nature.

I said last week that we would be looking at two landmark documents in our United Methodist tradition- the Articles of Religion of the former Methodist Church, and the Confession of Faith of the former EUB denomination. In the Articles of Religion, *Article 7, Of Original or Birth Sin* these words are included: “Original sin...is the corruption of the nature of every (person)...man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.”

There is a similar statement from the EUB tradition, in the Confession of Faith: “We believe man is fallen from righteousness and apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, is destitute of holiness and inclined to evil” (*Article 7, Sin and Free Will*).

Perhaps you're thinking: Wow, this is a very dim, pessimistic, gloomy view of the human condition! But I think it accurately reflects Scripture, and the true makeup of our human nature. God created us good, in His image. But somehow that’s been lost. There is this fatal flaw within us, this propensity for evil, that infects everything we do.

In the Bible, sin is not just isolated acts, like telling a little lie, letting fly with a cuss word, or drinking a bit too much alcohol. Sin is something much deeper and more pervasive. Sin is basically *self-centeredness*, our inclination to want to run our own life and leave God out of the picture. It is our being chained to *self-interest* in so much of what we do. It’s this *inward state of mind and heart* that leads to *destructive behaviors*, and our *inability* to free ourselves from this self-centeredness deep in our bones. In the Book of Romans, the Apostle Paul quotes some Old Testament Scriptures that refer to man’s sin, then says, “For we have already charged that all are under the power of sin” (Romans 3:9).

When I served a church in the Pocono Mountains a brilliant, prominent surgeon and instructor in surgery in a New York hospital often attended our worship services. He had a vacation home near the church and would spend most weekends there. This doctor had a very blunt way of telling me where he thought I was wrong in my

sermons. Once he told me that he felt I was coming down too hard on the evil in people – that he saw people under the pressure of emergency situations act bravely and unselfishly. I said that’s true, and I appreciated his reminding me of this side of human character. But I also shared with him my experience that the same dire circumstances can also bring out the worst in people. Around that time the Wilkes-Barre area had had major flooding from Hurricane Agnes. As a result, many self-appointed carpenters, who didn’t have carpentry skills, were ripping people off in the aftermath of the flood. I pointed that out to him, and likewise when people will loot from stores after a fire, or steal money and valuables from dead bodies following a plane crash.

There is this anonymous poem that addresses the idea that we humans descended from apes:

“Three monkeys sat in a coconut tree,
Discussing things as they’re said to be.
Said one to the other, ‘Now listen you two;
There’s a certain rumor that can’t be true.
That man descends from our noble race!
The very idea’s a disgrace.
No monk ever deserted his wife,
Starved her babies and ruined her life.
And you’ve never known the mother monk
To leave her babies with others to bunk.
And another thing you’ll never see
A monk build a fence around a coconut tree,
And let the coconuts go to waste
Forbidding all other monks a taste.
Here’s another thing a monk won’t do;
Go out at night and get in a stew,
Or use a gun or club or knife
To take another monkey’s life.
Yes, man descends, the ornery cuss –
But brother, he didn’t descend from us!”

The Christian view of human nature is that we are Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde. We have a tremendous capacity for good, yet we are chained to evil that colors everything we do. *Are there any of us here who can say that we are not a mix of good and evil?*

The Bible says that the root cause of this catastrophe in human nature (sin) is our rebellion against God and alienation from our Creator. We need to be rescued from the perversity deep within us. We need divine help!

God addressed this human condition by sending His own Son to set us free!

Dr. Wallace Fisher, noted pastor and author who served Trinity Lutheran Church in Lancaster for a number of years, in one of his books, wrote: “Sin despoils (our) motives, warps (our) best-intentioned deeds, lures (us) into blind alleys. But that is not the destiny God planned...(we humans are) created for life with God and (one another). Since Christ won that massive victory over sin, there is imperishable hope (for us all)...”

The starting point is to recognize the evil deep within us, and that we need divine forgiveness and help. We need someone greater than ourselves to free us from the evil that lurks deep inside us. For 29 years Bobby Knight was basketball coach at Indiana University. He was fired in 2000, after years of controversy, temper tantrums, verbal and physical abuse of players. He was put on “zero tolerance” after grabbing a student by the neck, and finally let go when he grabbed a freshman student by his arm to lecture him about manners.

Soon after he was fired, ESPN did a one hour interview with him. During that interview he said, “I’ve always felt I’ve got to be me, I can’t be something that someone’s trying to construct...I try to be fair, try to be honest. My philosophy and approach to things is just different than some people and situations.”

The interviewer was Jeremy Schaap, son of famed newsman Dick Schaap. During the conversation, Bobby Knight chided Jeremy. He said to him, “You got a long way to go to be as good as your dad, you better keep that in mind.”

Now I don’t know this man’s heart. But this attitude, to me, exemplifies the core problem about us humans: Our tendency to put ourselves at the center of the universe, to avoid taking responsibility for our own bad behaviors. On the other hand, when we are willing to own up to the evil that is within us, and ask for divine help in overcoming it, there is hope. Jesus came to help us, and to set us free from the evil that binds us. That is the good news of the Christian message!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
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