

“Who Do You Think You Are?”

a sermon by

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Text: “See what love the father has for us that we should be called the children of God; and that is what we are.” (I John 3:1)

As most of you are aware, Presbyterians, or Calvinists as we are sometimes called, have never been very optimistic about human nature. One of the doctrines that has been central of our core of beliefs is the notion of “total depravity.” Now Reformed theologians did not mean by that that we are all totally and completely depraved human beings. Rather, they meant that there is no part of our lives – including our religious lives – that is not affected by self-interest and sin.

I was reminded of that when I read this past week that the bankers at Goldman Sachs commandeered 200 doses of the swine flu vaccine for their brokers. As Maureen Dowd pointed out in a column in the *New York Times*, most Americans were disgusted to read that an investment firm received this vaccine, when so many at-risk Americans are having to wait. As one person observed, “When most people saw the headline ‘Goldman Sachs Gets Swine Flu Vaccine,’ they were super happy until they saw the word ‘Vaccine.’”

But it just isn’t the vaccine. Many Americans today see a double standard where many of the banks that were bailed out by government funds are still doling out large bonuses while unemployment continues to soar in this country.

When Lloyd Blankfein, the C.E.O of Goldman Sachs, was asked about this discrepancy between banks and common workers, he grinned impishly and said that his company was “doing God’s work.”

I am not sure John Calvin would have agreed with that assessment.

I.

To be sure, there is much written in the New Testament about the role of sin in people’s life. But remarkably enough, there is another word in the New Testament that is quite positive about the human condition.

In the letter known as I John, there is a good bit written about the nature of God and human nature as well. I John writes, "God is love" and in this passage he speaks of something quite positive when he says, "See what love the father has for us that we should be called the children of God, and so we are."(I John 3:1)

That note, rather than being simply an isolated part of the New Testament, is sounded in a number of places. In his letter to the church at Thessalonica Paul writes, "You are all sons of light." And to the Galatians were penned these words: "Because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts." And to the church at Corinth: "We are a temple of the living God." And in his letter to the church at Rome, Paul writes something very close to that which was written by I John when he notes, "The Spirit bears witness with our spirit, that we are children of God."

It is very tempting to give up on the possibilities of human history. In the past year we have witnessed unparalleled greed and fraud in the financial industry, as well as other areas of our life.

And yet when we ask the question about our real identity, the New Testament responds by saying we are "temples of the living God," children of God, sons of light. That may be more difficult for us to believe today than it is to believe that we are all sinful creatures. There is what the New Testament calls the grace of God, forgiveness, spiritual birth, being inwardly transformed by the renewing of our minds.

St. Augustine once observed that if you "dig deep enough into any person you will find something divine." Can we really believe that about ourselves?

II.

To begin, note that this emphasis, with which the New Testament is radiant, goes back to Jesus and his way of dealing with individual men and women. Jesus was no sentimentalist about human nature. He could be quite indignant about human evil. On one occasion he said that some people deserved to have stones hung about their necks and be cast into the depths of the sea.

He knew about human sin. Did they not spit on him, crown him with thorns and crucify him? He was always realistic in his approach to human depravity; he was also capable of seeing something even more. He could see individuals who were made in the image of God. On one occasion the gospel of John tells of a woman taken in the act of adultery and brought before Jesus. Jesus knew what the law said. By law this woman was to be stoned to death. But when her accusers had retreated, and Jesus was left alone with her, he drove home his appeal to something in her deeper than her sinfulness, something that her accusers could not see, but that Jesus saw. And when he saw it, he said to her, "Go. Sin no more."

Make no mistake about this. The New Testament is perfectly clear about this. Jesus had the remarkable capacity to see in people things that others could not see. Do you remember the time when Simon, the disciple, was vacillation, impulsive, unsteady, and unreliable? Jesus said to him, "You are Peter" (which means rock). Jesus didn't say to him, "You ought to be a rock." He said you are rock. That is your nature. Underneath all your faults, said Jesus to Peter, "You are the rock on which I will found my church."

Gutzon Borglum was a famous sculptor who was commissioned to sculpt the head of Abraham Lincoln. He began with a large block of stone and day by day he carved away on that stone until gradually the face of Lincoln began to emerge. A cleaning woman, who worked there every day, watched with amazement and slowly the face of this great man began to emerge. Finally, she could stand it no longer. She said to the sculptor, "How did you know Mr. Lincoln was in that stone."

Jesus had the capacity to look into the faces of people and see them not just for what they were, but what they could be. The author of I John understood that. He wrote, "See what love the father has for us that we should be called the children of God, and so we are."

III.

But go a step further, if you will. This emphasis in the New Testament on a person's dignity, value, and divine possibility not only goes back to Jesus' attitude to other people, but to what Jesus was himself.

In the church we have insisted that Jesus was "fully human" and "fully divine." Over the years the debate has centered mostly on the question of what it meant for Jesus to be fully divine and the divinity of Jesus has given many people great cause for doubt. But how much have we said about the "humanity of Jesus." The incarnation insists that Jesus was fully human. He shared our laughter, joys, sorrow, and suffering.

This is something that we don't talk about much in the church, but it is good news. Christ is not only the one who reveals what God is, Christ is also the person who reveals what we may become. As one of the early church fathers put it, "Christ became what we are that we might become what he is." The New Testament is full of that. "Until we all attain," it says, "to full adulthood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The New Testament goes on to say, "But we all with unveiled face beholding ... the glory of the Lord, and are transformed in the same image from glory to glory." Does that seem incredible to you? Maybe it is easier for all of us to believe in the Christian idea of God than in the Christian idea of man.

I think that each family has certain individuals who serve as models for subsequent generations. One of the people in my family who serves in that capacity was my great aunt, Julia Tutwiler, who was one of most outstanding women that the State of Alabama ever produced. One of her accomplishments was that she was the author of the Alabama State Song. But there were two other great passions that she shared. One was her passion that the young women of the state have the same educational opportunities that men enjoyed. At that time the University of Alabama only admitted male students. But due to Julia Tutwiler's persistent lobbying of the state legislature, she was finally able to get the legislature to allow women to enroll in that university. Today, one of the freshman dormitories is named in her honor.

But Julia Tutwiler had another passion. She was deeply concerned about the treatment of prisoners in the State of Alabama. She toured all of the state prisons and found the conditions deplorable. Often eight to ten people were placed in a single cell with only two bunks.

So, again she lobbied the state legislature, often riding trains all over the state. Finally, she was successful and the State legislature enacted legislation that brought about much needed reforms.

You see, people can make a difference. Often we look at the world around us and see so many things that are wrong. We wonder, “What can one person do?” The answer is that one person can do a great deal.

IV.

There is, I believe, someone here today who needs to hear this liberating word. Most of us have a sense that we are sinners. We know our inadequacies. We know our failures.

But the real question is whether we understand that none of us has to stay the way we are. One of the most powerful parables that Jesus told was the story of the Prodigal son, who having wasted all of the inheritance that had been given to him, found himself one day in a foreign country, penniless and living in a pig sty. Jesus said that one day this prodigal son “came to himself and said, I will arise and go to my father.” There was something in him that did not belong in a foreign country. We don’t speak very often about a sudden conversion or transformation, but that is precisely what happened to that young prodigal. He came to himself and he went to his father.

In his book *Abraham Lincoln* James McPherson records an incident that happened to President Lincoln twenty years before his death. Lincoln at that time was suffering from depression. He confided to his friend Joshua Speed that he would be willing to die except for the fact that he had never done anything to make any human being remember that he had lived.

On January 1, 1863 Lincoln did something very remarkable. That afternoon he and his family held a reception in the White House, where for three hours Lincoln shook hands with hundreds of people. After the reception Lincoln retired to his office to place his signature on the Emancipation Proclamation, a document that would free all the slaves in this nation, putting an end to what Lincoln had earlier called this “monstrous injustice that had made the United States a monument of hypocrisy in the eyes of the world.”

Lincoln waited for a few minutes before he signed the document. His hand was sore from shaking all the hands at the reception. Lincoln did not want to sign the document while his hand was still shaking, because he feared that all who examined the document at a later time would say, “He hesitated.”

That would never do for as he said, “I have never in my life felt more certain that I was doing right than I do in signing this paper. If my name ever goes into history it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it.”

Who do you think you are? The writer of I John declares, ‘See what love the father has for us that we should be called the children of God.’”

And that is what we are.

Amen.