

What Are Human Beings?

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:13-16

“Someone has said somewhere, ‘What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals that you care for them?’”

What are human beings? In the eighth psalm, the question is meant to express wonder. “The strategy of the psalmist,” Marilynne Robinson writes, “is to close the infinite distance between God and humankind by confounding all notions of scale. If the great heavens are the work of God’s fingers, what [are] small and mortal [human beings]?” But on this World Communion Sunday, the behavior of our species and the emphasis in our asking first turns our wonder into wondering: What are *human* beings? The answer surely depends on where you begin and with whom.

If you begin with yourself and Harvard scientist Marc Hauser, you may conclude that what makes you human are your cognitive abilities. You can generate a limitless variety of words and concepts. You are able to mingle ways of knowing what you know. You think abstractly, beyond what you can sense. You create meaning symbolically. If this is what makes you a human being, then will you cease to be human when a severe stroke takes these cognitive abilities from you?

If you begin with yourself and Cambridge philosopher George Steiner, it is your ability to hope, to speak in the future tense, that makes you distinctively human: “...animals would appear to know presentness and, one supposes, a measure of remembrance,” he writes. “The future tense, the ability to discuss possible events on the day after one’s funeral or in stellar space a million years hence, looks to be specific to *homo sapiens*....It is only [human beings], so far as we can conceive, who have the means of altering [their] world by resort to ‘if’-clauses....” If hope is what makes beings human, are beings deprived of hope by despots or oligarchs or generations of poverty less or no longer human beings?

If you begin with yourself and Alan Turing, a Brit who, in 1951, famously created the Turing Test that assessed a machine’s ability to exhibit intelligent behavior indistinguishable from the human mind, then maybe what counts as human is a certain kind of intelligence, even if that intelligence resides in a machine. Forty years later, a machine actually passed the test. Does this mean that if your child’s IQ is below 100, he is not quite human? Tragically, Turing’s sexual orientation was considered less than human by British society in the 50’s. He was arrested for “gross indecency,” underwent chemical castration as his punishment and is thought to have committed suicide in 1954. If your child comes out of the closet tonight around the kitchen table, will she still be less than fully human in 2018?

Even if you begin with yourself and a theologian such as Reinhold Niebuhr, you may agree that what distinguishes our human being from all other beings is our self-transcendence: our capacity to rise above the creaturely instincts that imbed other beings in the natural order and see ourselves from outside of ourselves, see ourselves as morally accountable for our actions. Does that mean a child born without the capacity for self-transcendence or an adult whose mind can no longer rise above itself because of accumulating amyloids, does this make them less than human at life’s beginning and end?

When we begin with ourselves and make some aspect of ourselves—our cognitive abilities, our hopes, our intelligence, our sexual orientation, our moral reflection—the measure of what it is to be fully human, then not only does this affect the sort of society we create and who counts for a human begin in it (a male slave, you remember, was three fifths of a human being according to our Constitution in 1787 for purposes of the census and seats in Congress; women, of course, were not counted at all). It also may find us acting or reacting toward others in ways that are, in a word, inhumane!

When the psalmist and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews asked themselves the same question, they began, instead, with God: O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.” The psalmist’s cosmology causes him to look up, in his three-storied universe, to the dwelling place of God above the heavens. Imagine the Poconos in the middle of the night with no street lights, no glare from a shopping center, but only the lights put in the sky by the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Given our expanded cosmology, I imagine Jodie Foster in the first two minutes of the movie *Contact*. To be sure, the movie begins not with God but with Foster’s human eye and with the fact that, after years of listening, she thinks she has just heard a being in the cosmos attempting to communicate with beings on earth. Then from her eye the camera zooms out and out and out

and out, past planets, past our solar system, past more solar systems, beyond our galaxy, past other galaxies until we are lost in the immensity of the cosmos. Wonder overtakes us: what are merely human beings in this vastness?

Yet “what captivates the psalmist is not so much the wonder which the contemplation of the starlet sky at night calls forth in his soul,” Old Testament scholar Artur Weiser writes, but behind the splendor of the sky, his mind’s eye sees the finger of the God who created that splendor and his ear hears not an alien being but the voice of God communicating God’s majesty in the cosmos, leading him to exclaim, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” Notice, he does not say, “What is Israel that you are mindful of her or Israelites that you care for them?” According to Weiser, the psalmist is “fighting the tendency in Israel to reduce God to a national God where the boundaries of the Israelite kingdom also signified the sphere of influence to which the God of Israel was contained.” In defiance of Israel’s fierce nationalism, the psalmist was declaring: “God’s got the whole world in God’s hands!”

But the psalmist is saying something more. He is saying that it is only in the presence of God’s majesty that mortals attain a right understanding of themselves; saying that human self-understanding is inextricably bound to God’s self-revelation; saying that we see ourselves in true proportion when we look at ourselves from the perspective of God. And when we do, when we are face to face with the majesty of God, we first feel ourselves to be insignificant.

Yet the psalmist is even more undone, in the next verse, by the thought that God has made human beings only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. Moreover, he is astonished that God has given human beings dominion over all other creatures: sheep and oxen, beasts of the field, birds of the air, fish of the sea. The rub, of course, is that human beings have let dominion go to our heads. Unlike the psalmist who ends where he begins, with awe before God’s majesty, the sorry history of the human race quits humility in favor of self-importance: we alone have been made a little less than God.

It is not by chance, then, that the preacher who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews quotes the Greek translation of the eighth psalm that reads not “You have made them a little lower than God” but “You have made them, for a little while, lower than the angels.” When he asks his congregation, “What are human beings?” he asks as one who does not look to the heavens to behold God’s dwelling place and self-revelation. He looks to Jesus. He is saying to the congregation: if you want to know what a human being is, if you want to see what it looks like to be human *and* made in the image of God, look to Jesus. The sight will take your breath away. He is the one who was made, for a little while, lower than the angels, humiliated in flesh of our flesh, so that we might know our true humanity, might see in his humility and lowliness the glory and honor of being human.

The effect is similar to the effect of the night sky on the psalmist. Initially, seeing Jesus, we surely are undone by how far we have fallen from the *human* being we were made to be. But look again and we see in him *our* human being, with all of its sufferings and sin and homesickness, assumed, redeemed and finally presented as wholly ourselves before God’s throne of grace.

A few months before he was executed by the Nazi’s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer personalized the psalmist’s question. “Who am I,” his poem begins.

They often tell me
I stepped from my cell’s confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country house.
...Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equally, smilingly, proudly...
Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage...
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?
Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!

What are human beings? Thou knowest, O God, whoever we are, whatever our condition, we are thine.