

World Communion Monday
Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
World Communion Sunday
October 7, 2018
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Text: Hebrews 1 & 2

This week I looked back at a sermon I preached on this Hebrews passage 18 years ago – in October of 2000. For those of you who were present that day, my apologies! No – I won't do that self-deprecating routine – I mean, it's always a bit odd for me to look back on things I did a while back. But the sermon in 2000 was fine – no one was harmed – it was a bit long - none of you remember it! But I did notice with interest, that the sermon I preached then, I would not preach in the same way now; I can understand what I was thinking then, but there are some things about my faith in God – how I see how God and how I see myself - that I see differently now. And as I describe some of that to you today, perhaps there are some things you will notice in yourself – some clarity of what holds true for you in your faith in God.

What I did see both then and now is a contrast in this Hebrews passage – a contrast about who we are as human beings, a contrast present within each of us. But what I see differently between then and now is what that contrast is. Back in 2000 I saw a contrast within each of us of what I called our sinfulness and our giftedness; but what I see now in Hebrews is a contrast being made about our capacity and our humility as human beings. So let me try to express what matters about that, and hopefully do so in a way that matters to you, too.

This Hebrews passage is tough. There is so much going on in it, with obscure theological and spiritual nuances that are a challenge to understand; and I don't mean that as a cop out – I should be able to understand challenging passages and communicate that to you – but what I mean is that you can tend to get sidetracked by how all-over-the-place and technical this passage is, that you can miss out on the coherent spirit and intention of what is

being expressed. And I think the place to go for that spirit and intention is the reference that is made to Psalm 8:

"What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet."

That's where I see the contrast in this passage – between human capacity and humility. And let's start with the capacity, which is the 2nd part of the quote it says: 'human beings are only a little lower than the angels, and/or God – given glory and honor – all things subject to them.' I wonder if that's how you think of the Bible describing humanity? – in such glowing terms? Aren't we more accustomed to expecting a biblical narrative of humans as sinful and broken, judged and lost? And I wonder if that is a narrative that we have come to read into scripture, something we expect to see and so we do. I find that at this point in my theological, social, personal, political, vocational, relational, life, that I am more and more intrigued by the very interesting reality that it is to be human – and the incredible capacities (the "glory" and "honor", one could say) that are a part of being human: capacities for love and loyalty, for creativity and courage, for kindness and compassion, for generosity and beauty, for growth and generativity, for knowledge and wisdom.

Now let me pause here, just in case you think I'm making this stuff up. Certainly the Bible is very clear about human beings doing messed up things – sinful, evil - whatever other ways you want to describe the violent debasement of humanity – and Scripture is clear that this is not good. And let me be clear – I see in the world today, shockingly ample manifestations of this human debasement – human harm done to others in ways great and small, seen and hidden, that depress and enrage, exasperate and befuddle me; and I see myself participating in that harm.

But what it seems to me that what we often get wrong – what our faith has often gotten sidetracked by - is that Scripture is speaking of all of these human failings not because it is an offense to God to be reckoned with, but because it is a diminishment, a waste, of what God

made us and this world to be. As the writer of Hebrews quotes Psalm 8 – ‘human beings just lower than God – given glory and honor – power in God’s world’ – we realize that the story of Jesus Christ which Hebrews speaks of is an expression of how much this world and the people in it matter to God. It would seem, given how human beings have messed up – then and now – that God would just give up; but that’s not what happens. As Hebrews speaks of sin and purification, of suffering and salvation, it does so as an expression of God in Christ reclaiming the human capacity to live up to the honor and glory for which it was created.

And it’s just as we recognize and claim that honor – that we have to put it together with the first part of the Psalm 8 quote: “what are human beings that you are mindful of them...?” – one way to get to the meaning of this, is to quote the 2 essential laws for living: “#1) There is a God; #2) It is not you!” There is a profound wisdom in Psalm 8 that the remarkable reality of being human is not that we are God, but that we have the unique capacity to know ourselves in relationship to God. We have the capacity for a beautiful humility, which is that we are given the capacity for perspective – the perspective that life is a gift, given to us in order to live out the creative goodness of the one who made us; the humility to live lives of gratitude.

Which is to say that we must read into this passage is that we are not created for dominion over, but for communion with. I know that it says “all things are subject to us” as human beings – but when we live with power over, control over, diminishment of, others, that’s when all that we describe as sin and evil is played out in our world in deadly ways. But we can read into this passage a different kind of power, because of the story of our Creator – the one who is the power of life over all, the one with dominion over all: this God of power comes in Jesus Christ to restore communion with us – God lowers God’s self in Christ in order to lift up our humanity. be in a communion of life with others. At the end of this Hebrews passage another Psalm is quoted as Jesus speaking to us: “you are my sisters and brothers, my family” – it is a remarkable summary of the good news: the story of God in Christ using God’s power to claim us as family, reclaiming the “honor” and “glory” of who

we are created to be. Which calls us to hear this as our story too – created, and recreated, to use the power of who we are to join in a community of life with others.

Which leads me to the final thing that I find different in myself from 2000 to 2018: which is that I while I find joy on World Communion Sunday in the image of the worldwide body of Christ - that I find it just as important to hold an image of World Communion Monday (and Tuesday, and each day) that connects me with all who are seeking to live out their true humanity: seeking a life of communion with others, creation and God. What inspires, teaches, grounds, calls me, is to know that in the midst of all the challenges that people navigate in this life – and there is much - that there are those with the courage to live out this story: the capacity to be a part of love and loyalty, creativity and courage, kindness and compassion, generosity and beauty; and to do so with the humility of gratitude. Whoever and wherever that is, that is who we as Christians seek to live in communion with – that is what we will persist in witnessing to as our shared humanity. That is the story our God has taught us and claimed us with in Jesus Christ – the capacity and humility of true life that we are nourished in at the table of life. Thanks be to God. AMEN.