



Being Truly Human

John 1:43-51 & 1 Cor. 6:12-20
Ordinary 2 - January 17, 2021
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This week, I was watching a British crime drama on television with Julie. Part of the storyline of that particular episode included a human empowerment speaker who gave to her rather gullible and eager sycophants a mantra to chant when they doubted themselves. It went like this:

**I am me ...
AND I am GREAT ...
AND I can do anything I want!**

Nothing too shocking or surprising here; lots of folks buy into this thinking, including ourselves from time to time if we are really being honest. What is shocking and surprising is that so many people really believe this about themselves or find such self-belief to be not just helpful in some way, but the lack of it in others as somehow the reason why they fail or dislike their lives or have varieties of complexes that lead them to believe they are somehow inferior. This mantra is the chant of much of humankind, whether they consciously are aware of it or not; it seems to be a general operating principle for a lot of folks.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth that was suffering from their own fair share of this type of thinking. One of their favorite sayings, apparently, was: "All things are lawful for me." Or in other words, there are no guiderails, there are no limitations or borders for we who are in Christ. It was if they were saying: With Jesus Christ, there are no longer any restrictions upon our lives or our behaviors; we have been saved after all and set free; God has proven himself to be on our side, so why place any limitations on what we say or what we do?

Paul answered them, clearly repeating their choice words, and adding something of grave importance. He began this section of the letter with the following:

'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are lawful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything.

Paul went on then to address some examples of the excesses that the church in Corinth was facing, but his main point was more general in tone: If you are in Christ, then you live with the law as a guide; you live with your concern for others influenced not by your needs or desires, but by the needs of others and a common consideration for them.

William Willimon, the great Methodist bishop, and pastor put it this way:
Christians are those who, in obedience to Christ, bend our lives towards the needs and limitations of others. For us, to be moral not only means to live righteously ourselves but also to live in a way that the lives of others might be blessed by our living.

Karl Barth, one of my all-time favorite theologians, put it rather well in his description of what it means to be truly human:

[The] basic form of humanity stands under the sign that it is [all] done on both sides with gladness. We gladly see and are seen; we gladly speak and listen; we gladly receive and offer assistance [from each other]. This can be called the last and final step of humanity.

Barth's words here were offered at the end of a long discussion of its various parts. He held that to be human is to have a willingness to really speak to another; to really offer one's whole self in what they say and conversely, to really hear what the other is saying.

Likewise, to be truly human, really human as God has demonstrated in Christ, is to be one who offers assistance to others willingly AND is equally as willing to gladly receive help from another. Barth illustrated this with the astoundingly honest words:

My humanity depends upon the fact that I am always aware, and my action is determined by the awareness, that I need the assistance of others as a fish needs water. It depends upon my not being content with what I can do for myself but calling for the [other] to give me the benefit of his action as well.

In a culture where self-reliance and independence appear to be the epitome of human development, Barth's words may sound strange or counter cultural. Well, they are. They speak not of the culture of the world, but rather as how it can be and should be when one follows the ways of God rather than their own ways.

John Calvin, the great reformer himself, put it this way:

We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will therefore sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.

Paul, Willimon, Barth, and Calvin all conspire here to remind us that in a world where self-empowerment is really about just thinking that you are the greatest thing to ever come down the pike, the Christian faith, the call of God, the example of Jesus Christ brings us to sanity and to the real form of human existence; living as it were with others in mind and actually acting as if others matter at least as much as we ourselves. These may seem strange words for us to hear for the world seeks to tell us something far different and does so repeatedly.

On a Saturday morning, nearly twenty-five years ago, I was sitting in the pastor's study of the church I was serving then, trying desperately to write a sermon. I was new to the position and to the church and I was experiencing something of a writer's block.

The stalling of my creative resources caused me to look out my study window into the beautiful little courtyard just off the church offices. It was mid-January in Michigan, cold and snowy, but a bright and sunny day ... very unusual for Michigan in January.

Anyway, in that courtyard was one small fruit tree that was covered that morning with what appeared to me as hundreds of small birds. The flock seemed to be at rest on the tree and in motion all at once; as one bird would light upon a branch, others would take off in flight, flying lazy, small circuits around the courtyard.

There appeared to be no director of their actions, but they were like a symphony of flight and rest, rest, and flight; they chirped and called to one another; they rested and listened to others in flight. I watched them for a while and was drawn into this beauty and harmonious action of individual birds acting in a collective manner. They were many, but it was as if they moved as one.

Somewhere in this illustration of bird-behavior is a model for our human action. 'All things' may indeed be lawful, but not all things are helpful. We are called to consider others; to speak from our hearts and souls to one another and to listen to what is said by others just as intently; to offer assistance to others with all sincerity and to accept just assistance when we stand in need. This is what it really means to be human; at least human in the Kingdom of God here and now and in the time to come.

Allow me to close my remarks here with the end of that portion I quoted earlier from Calvin. He said:

[We are not our own.] Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive towards him as our lawful goal.

May it be so with us as well.