

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent, March 15, 2009  
Lessons: Genesis 1:26-31, Jeremiah 2:4-5, and Luke 11:24-31

## A GENUINE THREE-POINTER?

When I was a boy, there were no 3-point basketball shots, but there were plenty of three-point sermons, and sometimes the minister would start by telling us the points, 1, 2, 3. That's a mistake because frequently the minister would spend considerable time expounding the first two points, leaving us all sitting in the pews, glancing at our watches, and thinking, "Oh no, he still one more to go."

The theologian Douglas John Hall writes that the cross of Jesus Christ confronts us with a unified but three-pronged view of our human condition in this world. Christ crucified represents to us "a high estimate of the human creature, a grave realism concerning human alienation, and the compassionate determination of God to bring human kind to the realization of its potentiality for authenticity."<sup>1</sup> That's a mouthful, I know, but the three correspond to the great subjects of Christian doctrine: creation, fall, and redemption. Hall wants us to keep the whole picture in view and so understand our redemption as more than just a happy ending to the story of human life that says to us, in effect, "Don't worry about all the bad and scary stuff that came first because God will make it all turn out right in the end." In the end, yes, God will, but in the here-and-now, we need to keep all three parts of the message together to understand any one of them rightly and to see ourselves and other people hopefully, realistically, and compassionately.

Those three are the cross-inspired ways of seeing human life and the particular people who live it: hopefully, realistically, and compassionately. I need to add that our doctrine of creation, the first prong, requires also that we see the human beings respectfully. Our respect for each other's humanity as well as our own is not to be overwhelmed by scorn or even by pity because pity too easily devolves into scorn. There is a nobility about the human being or, perhaps better, a dignity created into the human creature that even sin cannot completely destroy or remove, and we must respect that God-given dignity in the other person and in ourselves.

True, we are always tempted to want something grander than the dignity God has given us in creation. We want to be more than human. Tragically, every effort we make to rise above our humanity causes us to sink beneath it. The serpent-voice of temptation promises the humans in the Garden, "You shall be as gods," and that smooth-talking, lying

voice has appealed to us at every point in our history. But the truth revealed fully in Jesus the Christ remains: that God created us for a dignity we cannot completely give up or spoil because it does not come from us. The stories in Genesis of humanity's creation and downfall are, overall, messages of hope because they promise salvation. Yes, this is what you are – sinful, shameful, a living self-contradiction alienated from God, from other people, and from your rightful, valid self – but you were created to be authentically human, and God has not given up on you. Genesis leads us toward hope for ourselves and all people. Wherever we encounter people, we must respect the dignity for which God created us all. Otherwise, we will judge the other person, choosing to admire or pity, to look up to or else down upon that person, and how easily admiration becomes envy and pity turns to scorn.

Calvinism, which is part of our heritage, went much too far in portraying the human being as wretched, worthless, and disgusting. So-called “total depravity” does not leave a lot of room for self-respect or respect for others. Yes, we have spun complex arguments that the Calvinists were not really haters of humanity but were only making sure all glory went to God and no self-glorification of the creature of dust was permitted, but I think we have been a little like the person caught by the police on the second floor of someone else's house, holding a bag of burglary tools. “Oh no, officer, I was just in the neighborhood, the door was open, and I somehow got up here, but I certainly didn't come to steal anything.” *Total depravity* is a very strong label, and it has had the effect of permitting contempt and encouraging disgust directed toward the “unrepentant” population of our world. Quite frankly, if you tell me I am totally disgusting and my life is without any goodness in it, I am not going to do your prescribed “repentance” thing, because you have effectively told me I cannot be myself at all and be allowed into the exclusive community of the elect.

On the other hand, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Protestant Liberalism so over-glorified humanity and our easy potential for constant improvement with a little coaching that it failed to recognize the horrors of human evil in our world. That Liberalism's “better and better every day in every way” mentality crumbled under the weight of two world wars and the Holocaust.

It is because of the human dignity God created us into us that we must take sin with the utmost seriousness. But we need to get rid of the notion that sin is like a substance that can be measured against the amount somebody else has. Sin is alienation – from God and, therefore, from each other and from our rightful selves. We are made to love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Sin is life in alienation from God's love and mercy, which means sin is not something I pile up and carry around on my back, like the famous unbearably heavy pack that falls from the character named Christian in John Bunyan's allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. If the pack represents the weight of guilt, okay, maybe, but it still might imply that my pack can be much lighter than the one you're carrying, my friend. To parody another work of

literature (George Orwell's *Animal Farm*) it might seem that *all of us are equal as sinners, but some are more equal than others*. No, sin is alienation. It is a relational problem for us as we stand apart from God, separated by great barriers from each other, and hiding from ourselves. It is because we are so adept at dehumanizing other people that we are able to perpetrate such atrocious evils upon each other. We refuse to recognize the other person or group of people as created in the image and likeness of God. No one says, "Yes, you are created in God's image, the God I love and serve, but I am going to torture you to death anyway." No, we first dehumanize, as Jesus was dehumanized, scorned, and degraded in his passion, and then we complete our denial of humanity by crucifying him. So, he represents and receives all that we do to each other.

Only when we find the courage of compassion to see both the dignity for which God created all of us and, at the same time, the horror of the alienation in which we human beings actually live, only then can we see and be awestruck by the wonder of our redemption. Only, also, as we change our thinking to understand that sin is a relational matter, not a substance we can have more or less of, can we appreciate that redemption is also a relational matter and not a purified state that sets us apart from other people and above them. *Redemption in Christ does not separate us from the rest of humanity but, on the contrary, unites us with all people and binds us to them*. Sin is alienation in which we are constantly trying to prove that we are better than others. Redemption enables us to stand with others in our shared need for the grace of God. It is religious sin in particular that worries obsessively about its own relative purity and so is quick to point the finger of judgment.<sup>2</sup>

*At the foot of the cross, what we gain is not purity for ourselves but compassion for others*. To be redeemed is to be made able to be loved and so to love. It is to be restored to the household of God, to be welcomed home but, yes, as the prodigal and not as the virtuous one who well deserves reward. It's all there in Jesus' parable. The son is still in his father's eyes the son, even though he has disowned his father, scorned his family and his heritage, and degraded himself to the point of being less dignified than a pig. But because he did not make himself a son, neither can he make himself a son-no-longer. He goes home in shame, not triumph. But for all his stench and self-pity, he is still the son his father sees even from afar and runs to embrace and restores to his rightful place in the family.

Was this a 3-point sermon? Well, we need to see all three truths about our humanity and keep them together: the high assessment of humanity required by the Creator; the horror and cruelty of our alienation from God, from each other, and from ourselves; and the wondrous grace of the compassion that runs to embrace and restore us. The place from which we can see our humanity honestly is from the foot of the cross of the shamed and dying Christ. There, crucified, he is fully *who God is for us* and fully *who we are to God*, and so he is our Redeemer. Amen.

Notes:

1. Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Contest: Jesus and the Suffering World*, particularly the chapter, "The Grandeur and Misery of Human Being."
2. For this reason, I suppose, even in the face of all the petty cruelties and great atrocities inflicted upon people in our world, religious people continue to obsess over sexual matters. Why? Because sexuality reminds us that we are human, that we are creatures of flesh and of appetite, and that we need love, even though we very often get it wrong to our own grief and shame. The cross of Jesus Christ recasts that insight, turning it from a source of disgust and pretended superiority into a truer, more honest response, not of naivete, but of compassion and respect for the person made for the image and likeness of God, no matter how degraded by self (or made to seem degraded by the judgments of others) that person may presently be. We are a strange race that glorifies war and scorns sex, that perpetuates racism and greed but is quick to suspect love of evil desires, and that gets more outraged by consensual sex than by rape and brutality. Does our sexuality, then, not need redemption? You bet it does, and the force of Jesus' rather few comments on sex is that *all of it* needs redemption. Is anyone pure? No, not one. The message is not, "Anything goes," but rather, "Be careful how you judge." And be very careful about scorning and pushing away your sister or brother whose sexual shame might be showing. Simon the Pharisee concludes in his mind that Jesus is no prophet from God because Jesus does not push away the woman anointing his feet. "If he were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman it is that is touching him." The woman receives God's grace and responds to Jesus with grateful love. Simon will have none of it, for he is pure.