

“Divine”

How to Be Human, Part IV

Grace UMC

15th Sunday after Pentecost

8/28/16

I always find it interesting to track where expressions come from. A great many common expressions come from the Bible: "The blind leading the blind" comes from Matthew 15:13-14, for instance; "Can a leopard change his spots?" comes from Jeremiah 13:23.

An interesting phrase that does not originate in the Bible is, "You are what you eat." There are a couple of possible origins for this phrase. An especially fascinating one is a German Philosopher named Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach heavily influenced Karl Marx and other important thinkers. In 1863, he wrote an essay that included the sentence, "Der Mensch ist, was er ißt." Translated, that means, "Man eats what he is." It's pretty easy to see how this became, "you are what you eat." This is usually taken as advice for eating healthy, quality food - which is of course a good thing - but Feuerbach meant something very different by it. He was a materialist, which is to say, he believed that the material world, the physical reality, was the most determinative reality, the highest reality, the really real. So when he wrote "man is what man eats," he meant it not in a nutritional sense but in a philosophical and theological sense - we are matter, we are meat and flesh and plants, we essentially material beings and nothing more.

Was Feuerbach right?

Today we conclude our series "how to be human". We've explored the biblical truth that humans are creatures made in the image of God, a mixture of dust and divinity. We've seen what it means to be made as beings distinct from God, but still made - uniquely, as the Psalmist says, "fearfully and wonderfully" in the image of God - capable of knowing and receiving and returning God's love.

Last week we looked at Genesis once more and saw how the first humans were made out of "dust," out of the dirt of the earth, and we explored what this means: that the Christian faith is fleshly, material, faith - concerned with life here and now, with hunger and justice and peace, not trying to escape this reality but trying to bring the healing presence of the risen Christ to all circumstances. With a little help from author Chris Armstrong, we looked at how Christians should

avoid "gnosticism," which is a worldview, an attitude, that looks down on the physical world as something less than, something evil, something wholly separate from the realm of the spiritual and eternal. Today we will explore the opposite tendency that is just as problematic, because it neglects the biblical truth that humans are not just dust, but we are also divine. [video]

For weeks now I've been saying humans are a mixture of "dust and divinity." I have a piece of paper on the wall in my office that says I am a "master of divinity." I've never quite understood what that means. If something is divine, there's no way I can master it! By divinity, we just mean "of God, or like God." There is still a hard and fast line between us and God, but by God's grace we are capable of drawing closer to God. As John 3:30 says, "He must increase, but I must decrease." We are capable of becoming, through the Spirit, more like God - which is, to circle back to the first sermon in this series, a way of saying that the image of God in which we were made, damaged by sin, can be restored by the work of Christ.

But let us never forget where we begin, how we were made. Let's look at Psalm 8. King David, who wrote most of the Psalms, wonders aloud, and don't we share his wonder and amazement: "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." (vv. 4-5)

Verse 5 there is especially interesting. We are made a little lower than God? The Hebrew there is *elohim*, it can be plural or singular - some translations say "little lower than God," other says "little lower than gods" or "angels." My Jewish study bible says "little less than divine." Dare we say - close to divine, just shy of divine, partially divine?

Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* was wrong when he said, "We are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world." That's materialism. You are what you eat. That is not the story the Bible tells about us.

Think again to the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 we've been reflecting on. In chapter 2, humans are formed when the dust - remember last week - is joined to the breath of God. "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." (Gen. 2:7) Earth meets spirit, the dust and divinity join together. Many of us have inherited a notion of human life that puts the physical in opposition to the spiritual, but in Genesis, and indeed in the Jewish tradition, a human being is what happens when God's breath joins the dust of the earth. There is more to humans than meets the eye.

In this case, Yoda has Feuerbach and Tyler Durden beat. "Luminous beings are we," he said to Luke on Dagobah, training him in the force - "not this crude matter." We are not merely crude matter, we are made in God's image, God's very breath (the word for Spirit and breath are the same in Hebrew) - joined to "crude matter."

There is a profound hope in this. That's why this matters. We become more human when we live as if the material world is not all that there is, not all that is significant. There are deeper realities. We are luminous beings, made by the breath of God, made for a Kingdom "not made with hands." St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

16So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. 17For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, 18because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

The material world matters, but it is not all that there is. The kernel of truth in gnosticism is that there is something deeper than the physical world. The kernel of truth in materialism is that the spiritual world is not the only world. The whole truth is that sacramental understanding that Chris Armstrong spoke of earlier - that divinity and materiality overlap, that the things of our daily life can be means to the divine, means to grow in God's grace. This includes our neighbors. C.S. Lewis said, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal...it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit...Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object present to your senses." He wrote that in a sermon called "The Weight of Glory," based on that passage from 2 Corinthians we just heard.

Your neighbor, my neighbors, are immortal, luminous beings made in God's image. Our neighbors are sacramental - they are a means of encountering God's love every single day. No matter whether or neighbor is poor or rich, healthy or sick, black or white or gay or straight or male or female, no matter what kind of car they drive, their bank account, or their immigration status, our neighbors - all of them - are divine gifts from God to be received with joy and gratitude.

How are you in touch with God, and with the things of God? Do you make time each day for things of eternal significance? I hope you make time to pray each day, to hold yourself before God, to be nourished by God's Spirit. Do you seek God's wisdom in Scripture? Are you investing your time and resources in things of eternal significance, or do you find yourself too worried with accumulating

stuff? Are you finding ways to nourish your soul as well as your body? Do you seek the face of Jesus in your neighbors who are sick, poor, broken, and hurting?

There is more to this world than we often realize. We are mixtures of dust and divinity - our friends and even our enemies are made "just a little lower" than God. We are luminous beings, made to enjoy a God of infinite love and grace, made to participate in a Kingdom that is not subject to any vote or budget or campaign.

I'll close with the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which remind us that earth and heaven, dust and divinity overlap - if we look for it:

*"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.