

What is a Human Life Worth?

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Acts 17:22-31

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A couple of weeks ago a fellow in charge of municipal planning in a town in California said that the COVID-19 epidemic is a real gift. The virus, he said, is culling the old and the weak from the herd and clearing cities of the homeless poor that are just a drag on the economy.

Sadly his views are not unique. They represent a perspective that many in our society share.

I heard some beach-going college students on spring break in Florida refer to the novel corona virus as the “Boomer Eliminator.” However laughingly this remark wasn’t intended, it reflects a way of valuing human life that saddens me.

May I confess something to you? I’ve been guilty of an almost childish naïveté. I just did not believe that such views would be expressed in our country on this side of the Holocaust. I truly believed that the demonic orgy of cruelty and death let loose by the Nazis would have cured us forever of such views. But I was wrong.

The late Abraham Heschel, in an essay titled, “What is Man?” Once explored this question of humanity’s value. At first, he did it with a humorous touch, observing that a college biology text he once saw described a human being as “an ingenious assembly of portable plumbing.”

It’s true, as far as it goes. We are that. At least from one perspective, a person is pretty much a long tube into one end of which you stuff dead plants and animals, and you know the rest.

But Heschel turns serious when he writes: “In pre-Nazi Germany the following statement ... was often quoted: ‘the human body contains a sufficient amount of fat to make seven bars of soap, enough iron to make a medium-sized nail, a sufficient amount of phosphorus to equip two thousand match-heads, enough Sulphur to rid oneself of one’s fleas.’” He then goes on to say that he thinks there was a direct connection between such a reductionistic statement and what Nazis actually did in their extermination camps, making soap from human fat and lampshades from human skin.

It is only a very small step from reducing a human being to his chemical makeup, or to an economic unit, or to a mechanical metaphor, or to a problem to be solved, and the extermination of humanity.

Recently, the popular English actor and heart-throb, Benedict Cumberbatch (who plays “Sherlock” on the BBC and PBS) was subjected to a playful version of the reductionist game when Britain’s Royal Society of Chemistry asked the question how much would it cost to produce a Benedict Cumberbatch. They reduced his chemical profile to its essential elements, then tallied up the cost. According to the RSC, to assemble your very own Benedict Cumberbatch would set you back \$151,578.46.*

But, of course, this calculation does not tell us what a human life is worth. Nor do the calculations that are often provided in wrongful death lawsuits.

A human life is not equivalent to the cost of a bag of chemicals, or to an estimate of potential lifetime earnings. Indeed, once a human being is defined as something other than *an irreplaceable miracle made of dust and the divine* we have set ourselves on the road that leads to hell on earth.

Our value as human beings is set by the God who made us in his image, and no one under heaven has the right to place upon a human life a value other than the value God places upon us. As St. Paul says in our text today, echoing the philosophers on Mars Hill who also taught this same lesson: "It is in God that we live and move and have our being.... We are God's children."

Our value does not depend upon intelligence or ingenuity or education, skills or arts, strength or power or wealth. Our value does not depend upon what we can contribute to our society, nor where we live or how well. Our value does not depend upon what we believe, or confess, or hope, or do.

Our value as human beings rests entirely in the grace of the God who formed us and created us in his image and likeness, that likeness which is nothing less than the love and communion of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. In this communion, we live, and move, and have our being.

A lion feeds on the slow and the lame in a herd of wildebeests. A crocodile will eat the old gazelle too slow to escape the watering hole. To acknowledge that nature is red in tooth and claw is not to endorse a value system that would eliminate the weak, the ill, the small, the old, the poor, or those who just don't fit in. And to take the common fact of animal behavior and to turn it into a moral precept to guide society is to place oneself on an inevitable course of collision with the faith of Jesus Christ.

Throughout our scripture, Old Testament and New, a scarlet thread runs true. The farmer is to leave a portion of his crop in the field for those who have no land, so that they can gather what they did not sow. The citizen is admonished to care for the homeless poor and the sick who huddle at the gates of the city. Widows and orphans are not singled-out merely as recipients of charity, but are known as partners in compassion and members of the family of faith.

Those who pour contempt on the care of the lowly are warned in scripture, not praised. From the Hebrew prophets to Jesus of Nazareth there is a clear message. As our Lord Jesus himself says, "When you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me."

Today's sermon is really a lament. I know I'm preaching to the choir today. I'm saying things we have all felt and thought.

We are reaping a harvest of cruelty in our country that has been cultivated for generations. And if our society thinks it is just callous to see this pandemic as a sort of “final solution” eliminating those who are a “drain on our economy and a drag on our society,” please allow me to make one observation: such a view is not mere callousness, it exhibits the very spirit of Antichrist.

St. Paul, in his famous sermon to the philosophers on Mars Hill, is concerned about the danger of idolatry. Our Protestant ancestors, most of whom were iconoclasts (image breakers) thought God was mostly upset about statues. That wasn't it. That was never the point of the commandments against idols.

Nor are the first two of the commandments from Moses about statues. When God says, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of bondage; you shall have no other gods before me.” He also said, “You shall not make for yourself a graven image.” And it is that last phrase that trips us up. We've struggled for years to get the translation right.

Carlyle Marney got it right in his own translation of this passage: “You shall not make of yourself a graven image.” *You shall not make a god of yourself.* Because when we do, when we make idols of ourselves, we not only wind up godless, we sacrifice humanity too.

The very clever may create a smart god, and learn to despise the not-so-smart. The strong might create a god almighty, and sacrifice anyone who gets in their way. The self-righteous tend to create a god who never puts a foot wrong, and hates those who have a hard time getting it right. The envious love to create a god who thrives on resentment, and despises anyone who possesses things they desire.

Idolatry is not limited to a class, a race, a peg on the power structure. It is the common failing of frail creatures of dust eager to devalue the humanity of others in the service of the false gods we make of ourselves. And at moments of crisis, the ugly faces of our false gods show themselves in what we say and do.

But, on one cold night long ago in a tiny village in a backwater region on the far edge of the civilized world, a baby was born of uncertain paternity, although his teenaged mother swore it was God's baby; and that baby grew into an itinerant preacher, and teacher, and healer whom the best folks in town called a wine-bibber and a friend of sinners; and that young man got crossways with the law and died a shameful death on garbage heap outside of town.

He was by any measure on this earth a failure. I dare say, he was a danger to the best elements in his society, and a drain on the economy. And we believe that when we've met him, we've met God in the flesh, and he shows us what a human being is worth.

Amen.

*Bill Bryson, “The Body: A Guide for Occupants,” (New York: Doubleday, 2019), pp. 3-4.