

In the Image of God

Genesis 1:26-31; Psalm 8

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Several months ago I was fishing around in various places for sermon ideas. I particularly like to ask in unconventional places – not church councils, but parenting boards or my Star Wars fan club – because they often come up with unconventional ideas. Once person suggested I preach on Leviticus, so watch out! I can't remember now if anyone specifically suggested human rights, or if the idea emerged as a combination of several ideas about freedom and the law. But the idea intrigued me. It piqued a memory of years ago when I read Thomas Cahill's *Hinges of History* series, in particular his book on Judaism. He said that while we tend to think of western democracy as based on Greco-Roman principles, we actually owe a lot more to Judaism. Our hallowed words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident," owe much less to our Greco-Roman roots than to our Jewish roots. In fact, there is nothing at all self-evident about those truths. Ultimately, it is a faith statement.

Yet we don't think of it that way. We take those truths for granted, to the point where language about rights dominates most of our social discourse these days. Do people have a right to health insurance? Do gay people have a right to get married? Do public schools have a right to begin the school day with formal prayer? While the concept of human rights is indeed self-evident, even sacred to us, the actual application of those rights gets pushed to greater and greater extremes. What is the line between human rights and special rights? Is there a difference at all? Sometimes the discussion ends up in a place that makes us uneasy, yet because we take it so much for granted, we don't know how to critique it.

The problem is further complicated when we in the church adopt that rights language uncritically. I'll never forget my first General Synod, where I felt like the pronouncements were based more on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights than on the Bible. Not that I disagreed with the pronouncements or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but we are a church. Shouldn't there be a Christian basis for what we do? Or are we indeed nothing more than a political party or nongovernmental organization?

So I was intrigued by this idea for a sermon series and set out to find if there were any resources that address it. I ended up finding a terrific book called "Crowned with Glory and Honor," written by a New Zealand Mennonite theologian named Christopher Marshall, for the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the UNDHR. It covered exactly what I wanted to explore, and was filled with many "Amen!" moments for me. It helped clarify why I believe what I do, both my embrace of human rights but also my unease with how it is sometimes addressed. So this sermon series is heavily indebted to that book, and I hope it will be of use and interest to you.

Today I will talk about the uniquely Biblical view of humans as expressed in the creation story, and how that view is the basis for our modern concept of human rights. Next week we'll look at what kind of "rights" can be found in the Bible, and in the final part we will explore how a Christian view of human rights differs from a secular view, as well as what Christians are in a unique position to bring to any human rights discussion.

Of course, right off the bat we've got a problem in that the Bible doesn't speak of human rights the way we do today. It does use words that can be translated as "rights," usually in terms of a claim or precedence, the way we might speak of a right-of-way. The concept of broad, universal "human rights" didn't come into existence until the 18th century, with the

American and French revolutions, and even then, while they were expressed in universal terms, they weren't actually expected to apply to everyone, which is why Thomas Paine's "Vindication of the Rights of Man" was followed up by Mary Wollstonecraft's "Vindication of the Rights of Woman." Ancient Greeks and Romans specifically limited who was entitled to those rights, but it has been the trend of modern rights to broaden them. That trend itself is Jewish, not Greco-Roman, and we'll talk about that more next week, but for now let's define what we mean today by human rights. Martin Shupack defines human rights as "fundamental claims or entitlements that are acknowledged to be morally justified and that take precedence over other societal interests. Each person possesses the full panoply of human rights simply because he or she is a human being. Grounded in a belief in human dignity, human rights express the minimal requirements for human well-being."

We're not going to find language like that in the Bible. Instead, with no mention of any word resembling rights at all, we find this: O Lord our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; 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. (from Psalm 8)

It is a hymn in praise of God for God's amazing creation: human beings. There, that's the truth that's so self-evident, we don't even realize how significant it is. But it really is a statement of faith, and the story didn't have to be told that way.

In other ancient societies, contemporary with the earliest beginnings of Judaism, human beings were seen as slaves of the gods. They existed solely to serve the whims of the gods. In other words, they had no human rights! Compare that with our creation story, in which human beings are created last, but by no means least. Rather, human beings are the pinnacle of the entire act of creation, the lynchpin, the seal of God's good master work. Human beings alone of all created beings are made in God's own sacred image. Far from being craven slaves, we are "little less than God, crowned with glory and honor."

Recall that definition of human rights as being grounded in human dignity. The thing is, where does that dignity come from? What makes us think human beings have dignity? When we are craven and capable of all kinds of barbarism and cruelty and pettiness. This is something that secular humanism takes for granted, but cannot account for. For us, it's based not in reason, not in any conclusion we can draw from nature, but rather from this story in which God made a good creation, the crowning glory of which were these human beings, made in God's own holy image.

Now of course there are two creation stories, to the consternation of literalists. But each story tells us something important. In the first version, everything is created as a group, a genus. God didn't make a plant; God made plants. Not a bird, but birds. Not a human being, but human beings plural, male and female. We have dignity because we belong to the genus and species *Homo sapiens*. We are part of a group.

But the second story spells the first one out further, to the level of individuals with names. Adam, then Eve. Rabbis have said that this second story expresses the inherent worth of each person as an individual, such that each person can say, "On account of me the world was created."

Contemporary debates about human rights divide them into individual rights versus collective or social rights, and all too often sets them against each other. But the creation stories create room for both: humans as part of a group called *Homo*

sapiens, but also as individuals called Adam, Eve, etc. And these two truths are seen as inextricably linked, created as individuals who are part of a larger group.

But of course the story doesn't end there, for while we were not created to be slaves of God, we *were* created for service. Specifically, we were created to serve creation. Again, compare this to other ancient world views in which people were slaves, and the king was the stand-in for the gods. The king alone had dignity and human rights, and the king acted as the mediator between earth and heaven. But in Judaism, that kingly role is given to all human beings. We are created to act in God's behalf in the service of creation.

Certainly some people have interpreted that to mean that, like the most abusive tyrants of history, we have license to do whatever we want with the created world. But that is not in fact what the story says. We are given permission to use the gifts of the earth, but also to care for it. Being created in God's image means we carry God's dignity, but also God's responsibilities.

And that is another correction that a Christian's view of human rights has over a secular view: that like humans themselves, human rights don't exist in a vacuum. They are created for a purpose, not for slavery but for service, for stewardship.

But as we also know from the story that follows creation, we have not always lived out that purpose. The first human beings chose to disobey. This is the issue phrased in classical Christian terms of free will, and in human rights simply as freedom. We were created for service, but we were free to choose something else. If we were not free to choose, we would indeed have been mere slaves and would not have carried the dignity or the responsibility of God's image. Though the story of the fall tells it in negative terms, we can still find the basic message: that freedom is the most basic human right because it is what enables us to enter into relationship with God and one another, and to exercise the responsibility God has given us. All other rights proceed from this. If you think about the rights discussed in the Bible, those discussed in our Constitution and those set forth in the UNDHR, these rights enable us to be in relationship with one another and to exercise our responsibilities as stewards of creation or as citizens. The right to assemble, the right of free speech. The right to citizenship, the right to work. Even the right to pursue happiness. A strange right to be included in our constitution. Life? Sure. Liberty? Definitely. But the pursuit of happiness? The pursuit of happiness reminds us that before the fall, creation was good. It was a blessing. We were created for goodness and blessing, and because we are individuals, we will each experience that happiness in different ways. We're not guaranteed a right to happiness itself because we have to find it for ourselves. But we can't find that happiness unless we are free to pursue it.

O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; 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. O Lord our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth!