

What Good Is a Human Being?
Reflections on Theological Anthropology

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones
4TH IN A SERIES ON UU THEOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
Sunday, December 15, 2019

Hymns:

“We Shall Be Known” by Karisha Longaker, “The Lone, Wild Bird,” #15, “Wake Now, My Senses,” #298.

Special music:

“Come and Find the Quiet Center” by Shirley Erena Murray; “Peace to You this Sacred Day,” by Angela Salvaggione. Air on a G String, by J.S. Bach.

Reflection by Larry Boles (printed at end)

Sermon

On the list of the seven [Principles](#) that Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote, the first one is “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Everyone is important. Every *one* has dignity and is worthy of respect. As noted by our Universalist and Unitarian ancestors, the source for this principle goes back to the very beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Genesis.¹ It says that human beings were created in the image of God. Starting with Adam and Eve, humans are made in the divine image, endowed with a spark of divinity. Thus, each one of us has an original blessing.

Centuries after Genesis was written, however, some dominant Christian theologies upended that idea of original blessing. Since Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord in the Garden of Eden, they fell from grace. Their disobedience caused the fall of all humankind, forever. Because of that original sin, all of us born after them are born in sin—depraved! A depraved humanity was the view of the Calvinists, who were dominant in early New England America. Calvinism said that people are *not* worthy of God’s blessing and it’s only a lucky few who might receive it.

The Unitarian movement took root and grew in reaction against that pessimistic view. In the early 1800s, American Unitarians preached that we could grow in likeness to God. We could choose between good or evil actions, and if we tuned into

our good nature, we would likely choose right. Furthermore, the Unitarians preached that Jesus was not God, but a full human being who was a prophet of God. By his life and ministry, Jesus of Nazareth taught that every human being has the divine light in us.

This *good news* made us feel pretty good about ourselves! Early Unitarians were mostly well-off people. They had the luxury to cultivate their own divine potential. They did that through prayer and journal-keeping, intellectual and artistic pursuits, giving to charity, and telling poor people what they should do to get their lives in order. In other words, for people of relative privilege, your pursuit of personal growth and goodness could be a way to keep a safe, comfortable distance from the oppression and suffering in the world.

Theological anthropology is the discipline of theology that addresses the nature of human beings and the relationship of humans to the divine. For many Unitarian Universalists, including me, the starting place for considering this relationship in the 21st century comes from an essay from back in the middle of the 20th century. James Luther Adams was a Unitarian minister, activist and theologian. In the spring of 1941, at a Unitarian ministers’ conference in Boston, he delivered an address entitled “The Changing Reputation of Human Nature.” He reviewed concepts of human nature over the course of western history—from the Ancient Greek philosophers, to the Jewish and Christian traditions, to the modern age of science and reason, all the way into liberal religion.

Since the early 1800s, he said, Unitarianism and other forms of progressive religion had been too optimistic about human goodness. Adams did believe that human beings are created in the divine image. Yet he argued that we are far from perfect. We have no reason to be satisfied with ourselves.

Too often, especially in the late 1800s, religious liberals asserted that human progress was guaranteed. Progress was unstoppable, inevitable. We had no limits! Too often religious liberals gave the mistaken impression that the health and well-being of the whole society can come about merely by the practice of individual goodness—the idea that you take care of yourself, I take care of myself, and the world will work itself out.

James Luther Adams told us that liberal religion could not face the reality of evil. This was because liberal religion had failed to take account of the “tragic dimension of human history.” Just a few years before he gave that lecture, Adams had been in Europe during the Nazi rise to power in the 1930s. Still fresh in his mind was the roar of the crowds cheering the slogans of militaristic nationalism, anti-Semitic scapegoating, conspiracy theories, and self-serving hypocrisy. Still vivid for Adams was the sight of otherwise decent and rational people whose anger and fear and resentment led them to grant ultimate power to one party and its violent leader, who promised a return to the days of pride, strength, and racial purity.

George Kateb is a political philosopher at Princeton. In the same vein as Adams, he says: “Human history is ...the scene of *uninterrupted* crimes and atrocities.”

There has been so much to break our hearts. When I consider how much selfishness, cruelty, thievery and lust for power have been a part of human behavior, sometimes I wonder: maybe humanity *is* basically depraved. Unfortunately, none of us can resign from the human race. We are stuck with one another.

Yet we do not have to be proud of the tragic record of our species in order to affirm human dignity. We still must respect human rights and protect human freedom. As Kateb says, “You do not have to love humanity in order to believe in human dignity.”² This, I think, is one takeaway from the idea that everybody has a divine spark in us. *The light is not in us so that we can feel complacent or self-assured about our goodness, it's there to make us care for one another.*

This reminds me of a UU minister I knew many years ago. He had a button pinned on his shirt that said, “I don't want better self-esteem, I want a better self.”

Adams wrote that reason, intellect, and learning alone won't save us from the destructive tendencies of human nature. He said: “The world has many educated people who know how to reason and they reason very well; but...many of them fail to examine the *pre-established premises* from which they reason, premises which turn out on examination to be ... protective camouflage” of

power and privilege. The wrong way for us to think about being made in God's image, according to Adams, is to imagine ourselves “cuddling up to the Almighty.”³ In non-theistic language, perhaps he might say that we have an urge for the comfort of a clear conscience about our place in the world. Yet what we need is the dis-comfort and un-rest of a conscience that prods us to join side by side with people and communities who are suffering and struggling for survival.

Perhaps it seems heretical to criticize the liberal religious reliance on reason and intellect, especially at this time in the United States. It's clear that un-reason, demagoguery, and blatant dishonesty are the tools of many of the people now in charge of the government. Constitutional principles are under attack. Perhaps reason needs to be rescued, needs to be restored. Yet many of those people in charge of the government have decided, quite reasonably, that it works for them to join in the dishonesty and hypocrisy rather than to name it and stop it.

In response, Adams would say, what we need is courage. What we need is action. In his view, human reason is like a torch for us. It doesn't keep us comfortable where we sit. It lights the paths ahead of us. Yet it is our will, our courage, our power of decision, which “guides the reason and chooses the path to be taken.”⁴

After more than a century of scientific study of the evolution of life on earth, we know that our species, called *homo sapiens*, was not the first human species. Three hundred million years ago, there were nearly 20 different species of early humans. We're the ones who survived. Well, so far we have! Clearly then, the scripture's phrasing that we are *made in the divine image* is a metaphor.

The writers of Genesis beheld the miracle of being alive and living on this earth with so many other forms of life. In scripture they gave expression to their reverence for human life, for their sense of the sacredness of a human being. To me this is what it means to be created in the divine image. Everyone is sacred, worthy of equal dignity.

To be sure, that sacredness includes us right here. You and I are worthy of love and care and connection. However, rather than resting in that assurance, we can use it to guide us in stretching

ourselves. We can reach out. We can shine the light of the divine spark that lives in our heart. We can see the light in one another, revere it, and rejoice in it.

In the framework of James Luther Adams, the divine is the creative power of life, which is always creating a new thing. The divine spirit is engaged with life as life unfolds. This is what it means to say we are made in God's image: *We have creative power*. Though we are not perfect, we can participate in the divine creativity. We can participate by new ways of acting and being—in our own lives, families, communities and nations. We can play a creative part in the unfolding of the future.

This is another takeaway from the idea that everybody has a divine spark in us: *Human creativity and human courage are the basis for our faith in humanity*. We have the capacity to change our world, because we have the power to change ourselves.

The divine image in us is the always-renewing power of creativity. How we use that power is crucial. How we engage with life, with others, with suffering and injustice—so much depends on our choices.

Nancy McDonald Ladd is a UU minister in suburban Washington, D.C. In her new book *After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism*, she argues that our longing for a safe and comfortable stance in facing the world is an understandable wish. Yet in times of crisis, if we merely “continue to offer ourselves ... assurances of our own [goodness and] benevolence,” it not only shows a lack of faith, it's dangerous. She writes that we must come to “understand how the absence of a just society kills all of us—if not by bullets, then by a thousand tiny cuts to the integrity of our own souls.”⁵

Our theological anthropology is that we are connected, we are related, we are mutually dependent.

Speaking in 1941, Adams said that much of history is tragedy. He said that *before* the full devastation of the Second World War, before the Cold War, before the U.S. war in Vietnam. Today, there are so many things to break the heart. You

don't need me to list them; I know they are on your heart as well as mine. Humanity's tragic flaw will always be with us. This is not a call for resignation or despair, but for courage.

Adams calls us to summon the courage and the will to be engaged in ways that can change us. Engagement which takes us out of comfort and into uncertainty. To be creative means an openness to being changed. Together if we are willing to be changed, we can be a *force* for change, a force for healing in the world.

If our liberal congregations were criticized in past generations for seeming like warm greenhouses for the care and growth of the tender green leaves of our pure spirits, they aren't that anymore. Our UU communities need to be more like base camps to prepare us for the arduous journey through a tough world.

Last year this congregation developed a strategic plan for the next five years. Its three goals entail the kind of creative action that Adams would have argued are the purpose of a liberal religious congregation. Our three goals include coming together for depth and connection across the generations, reaching out into the local community as partners with groups that meet human needs and confront unjust situations, and growing in our capacity for compassion as we engage and learn about the dynamics of racial oppression in us and in our congregations. All these kinds of engagement are taking us out of comfort and into uncertainty. It's an exciting time to be part of this congregation. We hope you'll come along for the journey.

A few years ago, at the major lecture at our UU annual convention, called General Assembly, we heard from attorney and activist Bryan Stevenson, who leads the Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama. Bryan Stevenson told us: “If you are willing to get close to people who are suffering, you will find the power to change the world.”⁶

In these times, the liberal church must work toward being a liberating church—starting with setting the spirit free for solidarity, mutuality, and engagement with a world that needs our efforts.

Twenty-five years ago, my congregation in Chicago hired a young religious educator to direct our Sunday School. He had a passion for justice.

He got our kids and youth involved in the neighborhood around the church and in local agencies working with people on the margins. At the church, he began Sunday School every week with jumping jacks and running in place. “You’ve got to be strong,” he called out to the kids. “You’ve got to be strong if you’re going to change the world.” Indeed, you’ve got to be strong if you’re going to be engaged and involved.

The world is a work in progress, and so are we. Each one of us is a work in progress, with creative possibilities. Our liberal ancestors moved away from the false doctrines of original sin and human depravity. Now we are moving away from the false doctrines of human perfectibility and guaranteed progress.

¹ See Genesis 1:26-27 and 9:6.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Genesis%201:27>

² George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge, 2011: Harvard University Press), 3.

³ James Luther Adams, “The Changing Reputation of Human Nature,” in *The Essential James Luth Adams*, ed. George Kimmich Beach (Boston, 1998: Skinner House Books), 75.

⁴ Adams, 73.

Yet we can still affirm and promote that everyone is sacred, worthy of equal dignity. The divine light shines through each of us, to make us care for one another. Even though human folly will never disappear, the basis for our faith in humanity is in human creativity, compassion and courage.

The future is open. Human progress takes courage and struggle, but still there are no guarantees. However, it is in our work for justice when our sense of human dignity and worth motivates us, calls us, prods us and sustains us. Our sense of human dignity and worth sustains us. So may we live, and so may it be. Amen.

⁵ Nancy McDonald Ladd, *After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism* (Boston, 2019: Skinner House Books), 77. See an excerpt in her Spring 2019 *UU World* article:

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/let-perfectionism-go>

⁶ Ladd, 77. See a *UU World* summary of Bryan Stevenson’s 2017 General Assembly Ware Lecture at

www.uuworld.org/articles/stevenson-2017-ware-lecture