

***What Are Human Beings?***  
***Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder***  
***United Church of Strafford, Vermont***  
***June 4, 2023 First Sunday after Pentecost, Trinity Sunday***  
***Psalm 8; Romans 8:5-17***

**Welcome:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this First Sunday after Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

Psalm 8 says that out of the mouths of babies and infants God creates power enough to bring harmony to earth.

Dostoevsky described humble love as a miraculous force. To be humble means to be grounded in our truth, as babies are, so the truer we are with one another, the more powerfully Christ-like love can shine through us, and the greater our oneness will be.

If we greet one another looking for the Spirit's presence within ourselves and others, then we will be as true as we can be, because the Spirit is the essence of our being, and it is what makes all creation one.

So please let go and open to whatever form of God or Christ or Holy Spirit works for you, and let it fill you with love to share, extending your care and support here especially to those you do not know well and those you know are struggling.

**Call to Worship:** The Trinity is a complex theological concept, but what really matters is our experience of it.

One dimension of the trinity is a spiritual presence flowing within and around all things, uniting all creation, and a second dimension is how that presence works through humans, the way we serve as instruments of its mercy and love, and a third dimension is the guidance, strength and comfort we receive from it.

Let us open to that three dimensional living presence within and between us as we worship together.

**Children's Time—** Good morning! We talk about God and Jesus and the Spirit in the church, and we use those words as if we all understand what they mean, but if you went around this room and asked every person to say what God, Jesus and the Spirit mean to them, you would

be amazed at all the different answers. And that's OK. There are some churches where everyone is supposed to answer questions the same way as if there were only one right answer and all others were wrong, but we are free to make up our own minds in this church, and free to change our minds as we learn and grow.

How we think about God can influence how we think about ourselves, so learning and growing are important. For instance, if we see God as a strict parent who could punish us for the slightest thing we do wrong, then we could think that we have to obey rules and get everything perfect in order to be an ok person. That could make us nervous, or angry, or it could make us be strict and judging, like our image of God.

On the other hand, if we think of God or Jesus or the Spirit as being the most loving, kind, forgiving, patient, helpful, best of friends especially to those who are hurting or in trouble, then we could be much more relaxed about our problems, and we could focus, like our image of God, on being kind and loving and forgiving and helping those who are in need.

So it is really good to think about who these characters we call God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are to us, and to ask if our old images are still working. It can help us think about who we are as human beings, and what we feel is important to do in our life.

It also helps us realize what it means to pray to these characters. Think about the Lord's Prayer that we pray every week. It makes sense only if God is loving and forgiving, helpful and kind, doesn't it? Why else would you ask for God's realm to come on earth?

So now let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

### ***What Are Human Beings?***

The 8<sup>th</sup> Psalm asks God, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?"

The hymn "O How Glorious, Full of Wonder" asks, 'God, who are we that you should love us?' It says that human beings are born of earth, we are humble dust, yet we have in us a yearning to be something more.

We are a mix, though, because our yearning can go in two directions. It can lead us into the Spirit's way of generous-hearted love for all, or it can lead us into the ego's way of constricted selfishness. We each have to choose how we answer the question of who we are, and

it is a moment by moment choice—a practice, a habit of heart and mind, and even the best of us will be a mix and will fall and get up, fall and get up, fall and get up.

Yet the choice we make between following the Spirit or following the selfish ego will determine ultimately not only our fate but the fate of the earth. How we answer, “What are human beings?” will affect how we treat strangers and other nations and the natural world. It will decide whether we have justice and peace.

Yesterday at Bill Williams’ service the Rev. Mary Thompson quoted the poet Jane Hirshfield saying that our one hope for saving the world is our love for it. That is what it looks like when we answer “what are human beings” the spiritual way, whether we call it Spirit or not.

Psalm 8 understands why this question is so important. It says of human beings: “You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.” Psalm 8 meant dominion as a good thing, but today many of us have problems with the concept. Still, humans do have powers that other forms of life on earth do not have. The question is how will we respond to that fact?

It is clear throughout the Psalm that human beings have dominion not because we have earned it, but because the Spirit gives us power as a gift. To the Psalm, God is the source and sovereign; we are the stewards who serve the Spirit’s purposes.

Again and again the Bible shows God choosing the meek and the weak to be the bearers of the Spirit’s power. We see Moses, a poor speaker with anger issues, being sent by God to tell old Pharaoh to let my people go. We see the Angel Gabriel coming to fifteen-year-old Mary, and the Holy Spirit filling her so that she would bring Christ into the world.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century we saw young Mohandas K. Gandhi, a shy, bungling failure of a lawyer, turn into a leader who freed his people from the most powerful empire the world had ever seen.

What these and countless other examples have in common is that they turned from their self-concern as weak or meek people and opened to the Spirit’s higher power, and the Spirit flowing through them made them strong.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century French philosopher Simone Weil wrote, “Grace fills empty spaces, but it can enter only where there is a void to receive it.” (*Gravity and Grace*)

Last Sunday on Pentecost Herbert Goertz recited a poem he wrote:

Unclutter your heart  
Unclutter your mind  
Make room for the spirit to enter  
Then at last you will find  
The Tao, the Way, the deep Center.

This is what Paul is trying to get across in his letter to the Romans. To clutter the heart and mind selfishly with material things is deadening, but to set the mind on the Tao, the sacred Way, the deep Center, gives life.

It matters to our entire planet what we think we are and what purpose we choose to serve. This is starkly clear today, as we see where materialism is leading: the impact on climate and biodiversity; the accumulating plastic, chemical and radioactive pollution that will last for thousands of years; materialist societies that are obscenely unequal and unjust.

College study of the humanities is being abandoned as unprofitable, and instead the top majors are in business, science and technology. But the humanities is where we reflect on what human beings are or could and should be.

Right now the biggest tech businesses are unleashing a new technology that makes it even more urgent that we consider this. Over three hundred of the leading experts on Artificial Intelligence have issued a warning saying, “Mitigating the risk of extinction from A.I. should be a global priority.”

Humanity has become the earth’s greatest curse, yet at the same time, it may be the earth’s greatest hope. Everything depends on who we think we are.

Are we autonomous material beings with a little Spirit available to us in case of emergency? Or are we the creative Spirit of the universe living in and through our individual material life? Did the earth evolve us to indulge ourselves in unlimited power and wealth and along the way destroy other lives and whole ecosystems? Or did the Spirit that created life on earth evolve us to serve its loving purposes of greater life on this planet, in part by living in balance and harmony with it? Is our dominion really ours, or is it the dominion of the Spirit of love that has given us life and gifts to serve it?

Paul was clear what the answers to these questions are when he wrote to the followers of the Spirit’s way in Rome two thousand years ago. And Jesus showed us the answers in his own life. His dominion came by choosing the lowest place, by loving the poor, the hurting and the

outcast, by laying down his life for others. His dominion came through seeing himself as the servant of the Spirit and all that it had created.

What are human beings? We were evolved to serve as conduits of God, our source, and as instruments of Christ's love and justice, and as stewards of the gifts the Spirit has given us in the material world.

What happens when we live the life of the Spirit that we truly are? Maybe you have experienced this sometimes when you were stuck on a problem, and you finally emptied of all your straining and opened and prayed, and that was exactly when the guidance and power you needed arrived, or the patience and faith to wait until it did.

When we are in "the Tao, the Way, the deep Center," we can hear our calling, and see how to use our gifts to serve the cause of love and justice and peace in this moment, how to create harmony and beauty.

If humanity lived the truth of who we are as Spirit-created, Spirit-filled and Spirit-led, we would have a government of love, an economy of love, an earth that blossoms through our loving hands.

Last week the Rev. Deadra Ashton shared her hope that all the breaking down on our planet right now may be the Spirit preparing humanity to make an evolutionary leap. It is a crucial moment for us each to decide what human beings truly are, and to encourage others to answer that question for themselves.

Who do you choose to be and what do you choose to do?

Let us pray in silence...

**Haiku by Mel Goertz:**

a Swallowtail

I wonder if he's tasted

the Lilac's purple wine