

“To Be Human is Divine!”  
 Genesis 32:24-30

“I am a worm. A lowly, slimy, stinking worm. ..” These are the words heard on the campus of Carson Newman College where I attended undergraduate school. These words were heard when an upper classman ordered a pledge, a lowly freshman, who was trying to make it into the Music Fraternity, Phi Mu Alpha, to sing as they humbled themselves, humiliated themselves before their superiors on campus. “I am a worm. A lowly, slimy, stinking worm. .”

The intent was to put the pledges in their place. And that song which went on and on did a pretty good job of that!

There is in the church, what we clergy refer to as, “Worm Theology.” And that is--those pieces of hymns and confessions down through the ages of Christendom that identify us, human beings, as lowly, and worm-like. Now a lot of it has been removed from The United Methodist Church’s liturgy. I can remember the first time I walked into a United Methodist church knowing that I was changing my denomination affiliation, and this was the place that I would worship from now on. It was Communion Sunday, and the confession read: ***“We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine majesty—the remembrance of them is grievous unto us.”*** We said we were sinners in the Baptist church, but I really felt it, when I came into the Methodist church that day. ***“Alas! And did my Savior bleed? And did my Sovereign die? Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?”*** Is another example of us being made aware of our worm-hood in the old hymn, ***“At the Cross.”*** This wording was changed from “worm” to “sinner” in 1935, but one can still find evidence of this in print in the old hymnals, and our theology that humans are depraved and almost hopeless.

We need to understand our relationship to God and to others—that is what living the Christian life to me is all about—to understand that we are not the end all and be all of this world, greater than others, not needing the Creator, not acknowledging God, but, at the same time, we need to know that we are created as human beings, and we have faults and we mess up and we do fail in our responses and reactions and treatment of others, and the world, and ourselves, and God. And, in spite of ***all*** that, God created us human, and in

God's own image, and called us, "Very Good." And we have such potential, in our humanness—we are wonderfully and incredibly created, and we need to embrace that idea—that God loves us so much and we and all humanity are made in the likeness of our Creator.

This reminds me of an experience early on in our marriage that gave me some insight on how we humans sometimes feel about ourselves—the perception we have. We lived in Jefferson City, TN—a tiny little town in east Tennessee—and the train goes through the town, so there were from time to time, real, honest to goodness hobo's that would jump off the train for a meal in our town and then hitch a ride with the next freight train to come along. Well, one Sunday morning, when we were walking home from church, one of these men, recently arriving from a boxcar, followed us. And we were definitely in the mood to entertain him, seeing that we had just come from worship service and were feeling extremely evangelistic. So we invited him for dinner and proceeded to talk to him about Christ. He said he didn't want to talk about religion because the Bible says, *Be ye perfect as God is perfect*—and the man added that he could never be perfect, he was just a human being, so he couldn't ever have anything to do with the church or anything else religious because he knew that perfection was completely out of his realm of possibility.

Well, this was not the time to explain to him that the wording of this scripture, in the original Greek, was in a progressive tense that when translated into English really meant that one should be in the process of continuing to become perfect or whole or complete and not that one necessarily attains perfection. But I think that this hobo echoed what I hear all the time as to why people find it hard to enter into the community of faith, to attend church, and claim Christianity.

The idea is that one has to be or else claim to be perfect, saintly, and if there has been something in one's past or in their present that they see as a grievous sin or wickedness, or if they see themselves as one who lives with obvious imperfections, then they are not "worthy" or acceptable to God or should not even bother about attending church. The worm theology has taken hold, and the excuse continues to be made, "Well, I'm only human" somehow meaning that we are just cursed and incapable of being any more than we are.

Ah, but we have a wonderful book that we are to take to heart—a book full of human beings who are flawed, and whose personalities are obnoxious, who are concerned with their own desires, who commit crimes, and on and on, whose relationships with family members are horrendous, who are inadequate parents and marriage partners, who have missed the mark in so many ways—LIKE US. But these same people are for us examples of the people of faith—saints, if you will—worthy to be recorded in the HOLY BOOK—The Bible.

There was a book in print, very popular, years ago, called *In His Steps*, and the main theme of the book was that all the characters asked the question, *What would Jesus do?* every time any one had to make a decision. That book has bothered me over the years because I think the question should be, *What would Jesus have ME do? Given my talents, my personality, my limitations, my quirks, my background, all that I come to the table with, What would my Lord have ME do?* Jesus certainly is our example of living the Kingdom life, but, I think, Jesus would be the first to say that I should live that life with what I, Rebecca Foote, bring uniquely to that life, with all my capabilities and liabilities just like the folks in the Bible.

All the people in the Bible were used for what they possessed and in spite of what they were or weren't. We are approached by God as we are, in our humanness, the way God, the Divine made us, as was Jesus. We are approached by God not as we should be, God does not take us only if we become perfect, but God uses us and works with us as we grow in our understanding of what God would have us be. To be human is the divine plan. And the Divine One made us, created us in the image of the Divine.

The character in our scripture today, the biblical patriarch Jacob is a good example of someone who has many traits that are not perfect. Why, the patriarch Jacob was a human being, warts and all.

Do you remember Jacob, he was the son of Isaac (who was Abraham's son) and Rebecca, and Jacob was a twin. His twin was Esau and Jacob was nothing like Esau from the get go. Esau was born first, so he was the oldest son who in those times would be heir to the most inheritance and blessing.

Esau is pictured as strong, a hunter, virile, outdoors all the time. Jacob is a paler sort of person, words like retiring, simple are used of him—he was his

mother's favorite. So we start out with this rather non-descript person called Jacob—nothing special.

Now as time went on, Jacob learned from his mother who used deceit for her gain, and he too became a trickster, one who manipulated people for his own benefit. And this Jacob did with Esau, his brother, when Esau came in one day from hunting and was famished and Jacob was a-cooking up a mess of stew. Esau begged for a bowl of it, and Jacob said, "Sure, if I can have your birthright, your portion of everything that the oldest son gets from father. And I can hear Esau saying, "Yeah, Yeah, anything you want, just give me some dinner!"

So Jacob got his brother's consent to get the double portion of inheritance and his father's blessing. Well, you know the story. Mother Rebecca saw that this little scheme was played out as she helped to disguise Jacob so that Isaac, who was almost blind, would confirm that, indeed, this was his oldest son deserving of his blessing and inheritance. Jacob dons the skin of a hairy animal on his hands and neck and when his father touches him, believes him to be Esau and gives him his blessing. Now once that happened, there was no take back, even when Isaac realizes he has been tricked.

Jacob's next distinct personality trait—cowardice. He runs away, afraid that Esau would kill him. He's a fugitive. From what we read about Esau, this probably would not happen. But Jacob sceedadals. He goes to live with his mother's relatives—who deceive him. There's an obvious family characteristic here. Jacob came by it naturally. Like most of us—we can trace our personality quirks.

After Jacob is tricked into marrying the cousin he is not in love with and working twice as long to marry his true love, he decides to do some tricking of his own again. He has been taking care of his uncle's animals and he asks his uncle if he can have all the speckled and spotted cattle and sheep and goats born to the cattle and sheep and goats that were all of one color. Well, his uncle Laban knows that there would be so few or none that he agreed. Jacob made all the strong animals feed and water in front of striped rods and branches of trees—and in those days, the thinking was if the animals looked at stripes or spots all the time, their offspring would be striped and spotted. So before long, so goes the story, Jacob had all the offspring of the best animals and hightailed it back home leaving an angry Laban.

Then comes one more not so great quality of Jacob—he prays to God and bargains with the Lord. He says, *I'll give you one-tenth of all that I have if you get me back home safely.*

So, let's recount: Jacob, a rather non-descript person, tricks his brother, deceives his father, runs from responsibility, gets revenge with his uncle, bargains with God—and in a strange way, we are reassured by this character. If God stays with him, uses him, can bring good out of Jacob's life, blesses him—what's are our chances?

Oh, one last incidents in Jacob's life—the scripture reading for today. Jacob is on his way home with his family to return to where Esau is. And he sends his wives and children ahead of him along with gifts galore for them to meet Esau first and to let Esau know that Jacob will be there directly. I would imagine that Jacob thought he could soften Esau up, and if that didn't work, someone would run back to Jacob to warn him to run again before Esau could get to him.

So here's Jacob—probably the last night of his journey—and he's all alone. All his family and possessions are way ahead of him and he's by himself. Then we get one of the strangest passages of scripture that has been speculated upon by every theologian, pastor, lay person as to what it means. The scripture reads that a man appears out of nowhere and starts to wrestle with Jacob and they wrestle all night.

And when this man sees that he cannot break Jacob, he marks Jacob with a wound to his thigh which causes Jacob to limp and he gives Jacob a new name—he calls him Israel—the name of the nation which will come from Jacob's children.

Jacob then declares that he has seen and wrestled with God.

***Don't you want to ask, If it were God, why did Jacob win? Why would God even wrestle? And why did God injure Jacob?***

But I see this passage as one more assurance that when I struggle with problems and decisions and the will of God for my life, it is a real struggle. There is pain in my life, and sin, and imperfections, but I become more than I ever expected to be if I hold on and let God put God's mark on me and give me a new identity. We Christians call this new identity, being IN CHRIST, living IN THE SPIRIT. Remember, you do not have faith until

you come up against the hurdles of life and have to faith. You can say you have faith, but it takes meeting head to head with your problems, confronting the seemingly impossible, colliding with the demons of this world. And that's what Jacob had done.

I can identify with Jacob. He was not all perfected or all evil. He was a human being, he lived with ambiguities and God worked with him—this deceiver, this hypocrite, this bargainer, this coward, and all to this your own imperfections and I'll add to it mine. Thank God, we can be the church with all are sins—there is grace sufficient and God loves us—We who are merely human. We must be something, though—as God calls us at creation—*very good*.

And even with our imperfections, we still are sanctuaries where God dwells, the Divine dwells in us. To be human *is* divine—May we all grow and continue to be what God made us to be and live out our call to be human beings. Amen.