

What is a Human Being For?

Psalms 1; Matthew 22:34-46

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Earlier this week I listened to an interview with the American writer Marilynne Robinson. She is famous for her novels *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, and *Home*, all of which I have read and thoroughly enjoyed. She recently released her latest novel called *Jack*. She seems to have a fondness for one-word titles. 😊

At any rate, at one point in the interview the conversation turned to the state of American universities and the quality of education more broadly.

Both the interviewer and Robinson were lamenting the fact that institutions of higher learning have become (or are rapidly becoming) less about education as a means of cultivating virtue or becoming acquainted with the greatest intellectual and cultural treasures of our history or expanding our appreciation for beauty than about preparing people for the job market.

In many universities, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) departments are thriving or at least holding their own. The Humanities (philosophy, literature, art, religious studies) are increasingly falling upon hard times.

According to Robinson, this shift in what we think education is *for* speaks volumes about what we think *human beings* are for. Here's what she says:

We have diminished our sense of what a human being is... The idea behind the period when we built all those universities... was that **people bloomed like flowers**. You give them something to think about, you give them competencies, and a new thing comes into the world.¹

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<https://itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewPodcast?id=1001081584611#episodeGuid=42ac3dfc-1549-11ea-942f-bf8b627a55a9>

My ears perked up around the middle of that quote. *The idea was that people bloomed like flowers.* Give them the right inputs and watch something new and good take shape.

I had just finished reading our Psalm for this Sunday:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. **They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.** In all that they do, they prosper (Psalm 1:1-3).

They are like trees planted by streams of water... They are fruitful... They do not wither or fade away.

The same agricultural metaphor is operating in both the quote from Robinson and the psalm. People are like flowers. People are like trees. People have the capacity for colour and beauty. People have the potential to bear fruit, to provide shade in the heat and give shelter in the storm.

There is possibility that lies latent within each human life that can be drawn out under the right conditions.

If this is true (and I think it is), then the obvious question and vital question is: “What are the right conditions?”

Robinson talks about the importance of education and she is surely right about this. As Jesus says in our gospel text this morning, we are to love God with our *minds*.

Our minds are a gift from God and learning and thinking and diving into history and literature and philosophy and art—disciplines that may yield no obvious economic benefit—are exercises in stewarding this gift well. Minds are for thinking and learning and stretching and growing.

But Robinson is a committed Christian and she would surely say that education in and of itself is not enough. Human beings are not just *thinking* things but *feeling* and *doing* things, and other things besides.

There are plenty of people who are very, very smart but are miserable and arrogant and selfish. They seem somehow to fall short of what we would metaphorically describe as a beautiful flower or a fruitful tree (perhaps you know a few!).

So, education is important, but it's not enough. We need other inputs, other growing conditions to become what we were made to be.

Psalm 1 lays out what seems, on a surface reading, to be a fairly straightforward formula for human flourishing.

Don't follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread. Don't sit in the seat of scoffers (this last one seems particularly relevant in the digital age where cynicism and scoffing often seem to be the fuel of the internet!)

According to the psalmist, there is a *moral* component to human flourishing. There are things that must be avoided if we are to flourish as human beings.

And it's not just about "don't's." It's also about "do's."

Delight in the law of the Lord. Don't just learn about it, don't just add it to your mental library, don't just store it up as a useful bit of knowledge. *Delight* in it.

This command reaches right down into our emotions, what we long for, what we pursue, what we prioritize, what we *feel*.

Do this, the psalmist says, and you will prosper. You will be a fruitful tree.

This is ordinarily the part of the sermon where I would be tempted to say something like, "But of course we know that life is not as neat and tidy as a formula. We know that it's not as simple as, 'Delight in God's law and watch the blessings tumble down from heaven.'"

I'm not going to do that. I *do* think when it comes to human flourishing and divine blessing, we are outside the realm of easy formulas. But I don't want to go there this morning.

Instead, I want us to think together about the nature of this "law of the Lord" that we are meant to be delighting in.

For the psalmist, “the law of the Lord” would have referred to the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy in our bibles).

The Torah narrates the story of the creation of the world and the people of Israel, their rescue from slavery in Exodus, their placement in the land of promise, and the laws that were given to them to mark out their identity and purpose to bless all of creation.

I’m aware that one or two of us might not naturally see Genesis through Deuteronomy as a source of delight. 😊

To our ears, the first five books of the bible contain a lot of strange stories and hard-to-pronounce names of people and places, a lot obscure and irrelevant laws about ritual sacrifice and purity and tribal governance that have no obvious connection to our lives today.

But for the psalmist, writing to the people of Israel, the law *was* a source of delight. It told his people who they were, who God was, and what they were to do in the world.

Let’s fast forward to Matthew 22.

Here, we enter into an ongoing dialogue/confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel (Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians).

A lawyer wants to talk about, of all things, the law. Surprise surprise.

Which commandment in the law is the greatest? Which one is the most important?

Jesus responds with words that are lodged deep within many of our hearts and minds:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’
This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matthew 22:37-39).

There’s obviously a lot that could be unpacked about what “love” means, but Jesus certainly does cut to the heart of the matter here! Love of God and neighbour is the first, most important command.

(Incidentally, Jesus is here quoting that very same OT law that we often struggle to delight in—Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.)

But Jesus does more than just remind them of the law. He goes a step further:

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mat. 22:40).

One commentator says this about this verse:

The image conjured in this concluding remark is that of a branch hanging from a tree... Rather than treating them as axioms from which all other commandments may be derived, as one would work out a geometric proof, it seems that Jesus is asserting that love is a test of one’s true understanding of the law.²

A branch hanging from a tree. I thought back to Marilynne Robinson’s comments about human flowers and the psalmist’s picture of a well-watered, fruitful tree.

A human life lived well is one where love is the trunk and everything else hangs off like branches and is nourished by that trunk.

Love isn’t the first thing we get straight and then get on with the rest of the checklist. It’s not as though Jesus is saying, love God and neighbour and then once you’ve checked those off the top of your list you can go on to tackle the other 611 laws.

He’s saying, instead, that love of God and neighbour is meant to run through everything else we do in faith and in life. Love is the animating force, the fuel, the energy, the agent of growth and change in our lives and in the world.

And love of God and neighbour can’t be separated. Debie Thomas reminds us of this beautifully:

I don’t think it’s a coincidence or a mistake that Jesus inextricably links love of God with love of neighbor. Each reinforces, reinterprets, and revives the other. As heirs of the Incarnation, we cannot love God while we refuse to love what God loves. We cannot love God in a disinfected, disembodied way that doesn’t touch the dirt and depth of this

² Patrick Gray, “Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 22:34-46,” in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 215.

world. Our love is meant to be robust and muscular, hands-on and intimate. Reaching into skin and bone and blood and tears.

Neither can we love ourselves or our neighbors in any meaningful, sustainable way if that love is not sourced and replenished in an abiding love for God. Only God's love is inexhaustible; if we cut ourselves off from the flow of God's compassion, we will quickly run dry. In other words, the motion of our hearts must be cyclical — love of God making possible and deepening our love of neighbor, and love of neighbor putting flesh and bones on our love for God.³

Love sums up the law. It is our Torah, as Christians. Love tells us who we are, who God is, and what we are to do.

This is the law we are to delight in in order to become like well-watered trees, like flowers, like flourishing human beings.

Well, a sermon that urges Christians to love better is probably on pretty sure theological footing. But I'm aware that even the uncontroversial command to love can be heard as a burden.

I spent part of yesterday in a Mennonite Church Canada Study Conference on Zoom. The theme was "Why Church?"

At one point we were split out into random virtual breakout rooms to discuss one of the talks. We had just heard about how the church needs to be engaged in the fight for racial justice and combating climate change and engaged in their neighbourhoods and more.

In our group, we pondered how the call for the church to *do* more can often feel like piling burdens upon people who are already heavy-laden. Particularly during a pandemic.

People do rightly expect the church to be engaged on important social issues. These are important expressions of concrete love.

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2792>

But people also rightly come to church to hear that they *are* loved and that they are forgiven for that they have failed to do or are struggling to do well.

And so, I don't want to end my sermon this morning by telling us that we need to get busy fulfilling the law of love and doing more for Jesus without *also* saying that all of our efforts to love like this are preceded and underwritten by God's love for us.

What is true of our lives—that love is the trunk of the tree that everything else hangs off—is true of God's relationship to us, to the church, and to the world.

God's love is the trunk. Our attempts to love proceed from the trunk like branches.

Jesus says this himself:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

God's love for us and for the world is deeper, truer, and stronger than anything we will ever be able to produce in our lives.

We fumble towards love. We try and fail and try again. We make incremental progress here and there in becoming better lovers.

But God *is* love.

And God's love is not like ours so often is—self-serving, measured, conditional. God's love is like a father at a gate whose love does not wane no matter how often it is scorned.

God's love does not demand a reckoning when the sin-sick prodigals stumble home seeking little more than a corner of the servants' quarters. God's love is not carefully measured out in proportion to what God receives in return.

God's love always protects, always hopes, always perseveres. It never fails.

1 John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us."

At one point, I think I interpreted this as something like, “We are supposed to love God and others because God’s love came first chronologically.” I did this for you first and now you’d better respond in kind!

And I suppose this is true, on one level. But I think that when it comes to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, chronology is subsumed under ontology (which is just a fancy word for “nature of reality”).

God’s love is prior to ours, certainly, but it is also around and underneath and within and beyond any of our smaller loves. It is the origin and end of all things.

Our love is nothing more or less than participation in God’s very being.

This is the good news of the gospel.

So. Love God. With all of who you are.

Love your neighbour as yourself. This is who we are because this is who God is.

Amen.

