



"An Accurate Diagnosis"

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Day of Pentecost

I'd like to begin this morning by telling you something that won't be remotely surprising: I think Christianity gets it right in our understanding of human nature. Given that Plymouth is a traditional Protestant Church and that I am studying at a traditional Protestant Seminary, I think you'd be surprised if I said anything else.

But that doesn't make the point any less important. And so let's start with the basics about Christianity's take on human nature. There are two points:

1) First, the foundational point is that humans are inherently sinful -- in other words, sin is embedded in our very being. Now I'm not necessarily talking about total human depravity as some might say. I'm instead talking about human tendency to live selfishly and to do things that are contrary to loving our neighbor as ourselves. Our weekly confessions articulate the type of sinfulness I'm talking about.

This concept is rooted in the Biblical idea that humankind is fallen from the outset. Original Sin, whether literally interpreted or not, is based on the Biblical ideal that as descendants of Adam and Eve, we have inherited the sin initiated in the Garden of Eden. Whatever you believe about Adam and Eve, the basic idea is that all of us are sinners.

2) The second point is the good news: God remains ready to forgive us. Again, this is what we do in our weekly confessions. We ask for forgiveness and through God's grace we receive it. And we come back and do it again the following week on the theory that we can't simply shed our inherently sinful nature between Sundays.

Now I don't know about you, but this Christian perspective takes a great weight off my shoulders...but more on that later.

In today's reading from Romans, Paul is talking, in a very personal way, about propensity to sin. Let me re-read a few comments Paul makes about himself: "I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." And he continues later: "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." And of course one of his most famous lines: "Wretched man that I am."

Now I'd call that some pretty intense self-flagellation. It sounds like Paul had serious issues to wrestle with. But I suppose we shouldn't be too surprised about Paul's tone given that he was a zealous persecutor of Christians prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus.

It must have been about a day or two after the Virginia Tech tragedy that I noticed something about myself. At work I walked by the desk of a young Korean-American

man with very short dark hair. When I looked at him, I couldn't help but flash back to the videotapes the murderer, Mr. Cho, made of himself. In fact, that same experience has repeated itself multiple times. Now I logically know that Cho's psychotic personality has nothing to do with other Koreans, but that logic isn't stopping me from having this same flashback whenever I see someone who I think resembles Mr. Cho.

About 2 weeks after 9/11, I had to make a trip to Houston for business. Not surprisingly, I was quite unnerved at the prospect of getting on a plane. As I checked in, I noticed a few dark skinned men traveling as a group. I let my imagination go to work thinking they could be terrorists. After all, they were well-dressed and well behaved, just like the 9/11 murderers. Now logically I knew that they had done absolutely nothing to make me suspicious. Nevertheless I spent a good portion of the flight keeping an eye on them.

Am I a racial profiler, or a racist? I certainly don't intend to be; in fact, I try not to be. These two stories I just told about myself are relatively mild examples, but truth be told, I have plenty more biases, more serious ones, most of which I'd prefer not to speak so openly about. I don't mean to have those biases. I don't want to have those biases. I just do. I can't help it.

Oh wretched man that I am? Well those aren't the exact words I would use to describe myself, but they are directionally correct. Yes I think Christianity has me accurately pegged as a sinner.

I don't think anyone would debate whether racism is a serious sin. To begin with, racism is directly contrary to the idea of loving your neighbor as yourself.

Many consider slavery, which is arguably the ultimate expression of racism, to be America's Original Sin -- kind of the American version of biting the forbidden fruit. This is all the more ironic given that the Declaration of Independence would seem to banish slavery, not to mention racism. All men are created equal? We're still working on that one.

Our nation continues to wrestle with these racist roots, and that seems like a good thing. Open dialogue about this issue is necessary. But it seems that recently, racism has been particularly in our national consciousness. All I have to say is one person's name and you'll know what I mean. Don Imus. While the Imus episode is just the latest in a string of similar incidents, for some reason his words set off a nationwide debate.

We've progressed a great deal as a nation, and thankfully pretty much everyone I've heard on the Imus situation seems to agree that what he said was racist, not to mention misogynistic.

Nevertheless there is widespread and emotional disagreement about what should have happened to him. I think you'll all be relieved to know that I'm not going to share my opinion on this divisive issue. Based on what I've noticed from debates around the water cooler, my guess is that about 50% of you would walk out.

But I do want to talk about how he handled the mess, and I want to talk about it through a Christian lens.

It occurs to me that Imus made a fundamental error in the aftermath. Of course it was good that he apologized. And seemingly these apologies were genuine, although, of course, they were also somewhat self-serving.

Imus's strategy was to follow up apology by asserting that he is a good person, an approach right out of the classic tenet of management: "Criticize the behavior not the

person." One could debate whether this was the right approach, but it's not what I want to focus on.

Instead I want to focus on something Imus didn't say. My thought is that Imus might have been better served to take a page out of the Christian playbook and admit that he might actually be somewhat racist -- or at least have these tendencies. Perhaps he could have said something like: "Maybe I am somewhat racist and didn't really recognize it until now." Perhaps he would be viewed differently.

Regardless, I think it's safe to say that Imus was not following the example set by Paul. No wretched man he! Not even close. The strategy of "good man does bad thing" is certainly not how Paul would have handled it.

The admission of a fundamental flaw like propensity for racism is a far different kind of contrition than mere apology. While apology is absolutely necessary, it isn't much of a diagnosis of the underlying problem. Imus's approach didn't give much confidence that he wouldn't do it again, arguably because he didn't understand the problem.

A generic rule of thumb in psychology is that healing can't begin until the patient acknowledges the problem. Then and only then can one begin down the path toward healing.

Similarly, Step One in the tried and true Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program reads as follows: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable."

Every successful AA member that I have known has one thing in common -- they wake up every morning recognizing that they are still at step one. There seems to be great irony in this. Yes you can't start healing until you admit the problem. But the irony is that you can't stay healed unless you continually recognize that the problem is still there. Said differently, you can't stay healed unless you recognize that you are never fully healed.

Now that sounds downright Christian. Original Sin 101 says that we were born sinners and remain sinners. We are never fully healed. The virus may be dormant but it's still there. I think that's a pretty good read on human nature. I'd call it an accurate diagnosis.

Probably the best course I have ever taken in my academic life was during my senior year in high school. The course was called Black Authors. It was taught by a young black teacher and the class was mostly filled with preppy suburban whites.

Our first assignment was to come back to class with two "N-word" jokes. I still remember mine. At that class, we all told our jokes, somewhat uncomfortably. There may even have been some laughter. The teacher told a couple himself.

This exercise did exactly what the teacher wanted it to do. To begin with, sharing these jokes broke down the reluctance to talk about taboos. But more importantly, by discussing the jokes and comparing them to facts, we were able to see the fallacy of the implicit assumptions behind the humor. Many if not all of us were able to see that we too held some of these fallacies as truth. Yes, we diagnosed the problem.

This course taught me something about myself -- that despite my best intentions, I had some racist tendencies. Talking about these nasty jokes helped make me aware of this. They helped all of us recognize that we weren't quite who we thought we were. I've never been the same since that class.

I wonder what Imus would be like if he had a similar epiphany. It's not too late Mr.

Imus.

There was an academic study done recently that concluded that in the National Basketball Association, white referees call fouls on black players at a higher rate than they do on white players, and visa versa as well. The study further concluded that the biases were "implicit" and "unconscious" rather than outright racism. The NBA and some players dismissed the results.

Well, I'd be surprised if these conclusions weren't at least somewhat true. One player called the results "stupid." I'd call the results "human nature."

I work in corporate America and am pleased to confirm the strong effort made over the past decade to embrace the values of diversity. One part of this effort is required diversity training. Now by way of full disclosure, I see diversity training as a very good thing. I see it as implicit acknowledgment of the reality that our natural tendencies are in the opposite direction of diversity.

A *Time* Magazine article from a few weeks ago outlines a study on such diversity initiatives conducted by prominent sociologists. That study concludes that these diversity efforts haven't had much impact. Alarming, the article also points out that such training can actually generate a backlash. Let me read a quote: "Mandatory diversity training in particular may even activate a bias. Researchers also see evidence of 'irresistible stereotypes,' or biases so deeply ingrained that they simply can't be taught away in a one-day workshop."

What this article tells us is that these tendencies are deeply embedded and can't be reversed in a single day. Is that a big surprise? Guess what Paul would say.

A number of years ago in France, the wearing of religious garb or icons was banned in French public schools -- for example, no head scarves for Islamic girls and no crucifixes for Christian boys or girls.

Presumably a goal was to reduce tension between students of differing faiths. The law was also reflective of the French emphasis on separation of Church and State. The problem with this approach is that it tries to solve diversity tensions by simply ignoring them. To say it differently, I see this approach as ignoring the basics of human nature.

Yes we are sinners. Papering over our differences to create the illusion of harmony is, in my view, potentially quite dangerous in the long run.

One of the most famous sermons in our nation's history is named "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." It was given in 1741 by Jonathon Edwards, one of early America's Christian leaders. The title alone tells us a lot -- but let me read you a bit:

O sinner! Consider the danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit full of fire of wrath that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it.

Now you might be surprised to know that with all this talk about wretchedness, sinfulness and now dangling over a burning pit, I'm not trying to ruin your holiday weekend. In fact, my aim is quite the opposite.

I hinted at this earlier. From a personal perspective, I see this admission that I am not and do not have to be perfect as a great weight off of my shoulders. The promise of God's forgiveness is life-fulfilling.

Jonathon Edwards's sermon presents our internal sins as something to be deathly afraid of, especially because of the potential consequences. What I'm saying is that such inherent sin is something we need to sincerely try to understand -- in a sense, we need to embrace it as part of our very being.

Don't be afraid of sin, and certainly not because of God. Again, the opposite is true: only by understanding your propensity for sin can you begin to make right your relationship with God. This is what we try to do every Sunday in our confessions.

One of the best aspects of this Christian perspective on human nature is its practicality. To put it bluntly, understanding our propensity for sin can keep us from doing some really dumb stuff and, conversely, can help us do the right thing under difficult circumstances.

The idea is that because you know you have deeply embedded biases, you're less likely to act out those biases.

Yes, I think Christianity has it right. We are indeed sinners. I see this as an accurate diagnosis of the problem. And without an accurate diagnosis, the problems will only fester, recurring time and again without any realistic hope of breaking cycles of bad behavior.

Paul's tone may have been a bit over the top, but he's spot on when he says we have a naturally ingrained gravitational pull away from the good things we're supposed to do - a natural gravitational pull away from being the type of person Jesus calls us to be. And it's this kind of self-knowledge that gives us the tools to live up to our potential.

Yes, Christianity does indeed have us accurately diagnosed. And I thank God for that.

Amen.

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