Sunday, February 17, 1974
I'M ONLY HUMAN!
Exodus 32:1-4,19-24

"Tell your readers," a woman wrote Ann Landers, "never to leave their keys in a parked car." Her young son had been jailed for car theft, and she blamed the owner of the car for being careless. As for her son's taking the car, the mother explained, "The keys were in it, and after. all, he's only human."

She was trying to convince herself and others that what her son did was beyond his control. She wanted to believe that being human rendered him powerless to resist an appealing temptation. She was, grasping the popular excuse that we all like to lean on when we make a mistake or yield to a temptation and are trapped with the consequences.

She was trying to rationalize an act that her son had committed, trying to make it look as if he was not to blame because after all, he was only human. In fact. she even went further, she tried to place most of the blame on the person who left the keys in the car. She seemed determined to avoid the Biblical truth — the fact that we do have a choice in such matters, that we act by personal decision, that we are not puppets on a string.

"I'm only human! It wasn't my fault. Someone left the keys in the car, so I got into the car and pretty soon I found myself driving along." That kind of reasoning and excuse-making has been around for a long time.

In the Bible, we can hear King David rationalizing his rendezvous with Bathsheba in a similar way. "She was a beautiful woman, Lord, and she was all alone that night, and I was alone, and after all, I'm only human."

Aaron, the brother of Moses also said much the same thing thousands of years ago. The people of Israel had been following Moses for some time. While they camped, Moses had gone into the mountains to talk with God. He was seeking answers as to how to organize the people under the laws of God. While he was gone, the people became restless. Not only was Moses far away, but God seemed even farther. They wanted a God they could see and control. So, they said to Aaron, "Get busy, make us some gods." Aaron didn't argue. "Bring me all the gold jewelry you have," he said. Then he melted it in the fire and fashioned it into a golden calf for the people to worship.

When Moses returned, he saw the golden calf and the cele-bration taking place around it. In his anger, he took the idol they h.ad made, burned it with fire, then ground it in-to powder, scattered it on the water and made the people drink it.

Then Moses said to Aaron, "How did this come about?" Aaron's answer is a classic one. He said, "The people asked me to make them a god," and I said to them, "Let any who have gold take it off, so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf."

Aaron was frightened at what he had done. He was afraid of the act itself and of what Moses would say. He trembled before the storm he had raised. And so, he tried to persuade Moses and perhaps in some degree to persuade himself, that it was not he that had done this thing. He puts the blame on the fire. "The fire did it," he declares. He will not face his own weakness and accept responsibility, yet he will not tell a lie in words. He tells what is technically true. He

had put the gold into the fire and this calf had come out. But he leaves out the one important point, his own personal involvement in it all; the fact that he had given in to the people's demands, and the further fact that he had in fact molded the earrings and other jewelry into the shape of a calf, and that he had taken it out of the fire and set it on its pedestal for the people to worship. He tells it so that it looks automatic, as if he had no real responsibility in the matter. It is a curious, ingenious, but transparent lie. He might've added, "After all, Moses, I'm only human."

Aren't we all like Aaron, often ready to lay the blame on the fire? The fire did it, we are quick to say. I couldn't help it.

A person goes wrong. He loses the freshness of his humanity. He becomes profane, cruel, and dishonest. Suppose you question him about his life, and he answers, "I am the victim of circumstances. After all, I grew up in a time when there was dishonesty all around me." He might even add, "I grew up in the Watergate era. Furthermore, when I was in college, I got into bad company. When I went into business, I was surrounded by bad influences. Then I became rich, and people flattered me. The world has made me into what I am, this fiery, passionate, dishonest world. I had in my hands the gold of my boyhood which God me. Then I cast it into the fire and there came out this calf. After all, I'm only human."

Now the fault in this kind of reasoning does not lie in acknowledging that there's a weakness in our human nature. All of us are subject to temptation and bad influences. The fault in the reasoning is in totally blaming eternal forces or the environment-for our decisions and actions. The fire did it, I couldn't help it!

Not long ago I met a person who was very rude and tactless in her relationships with other people and because of it she had very few friends. "I can't help it," she said, "That's just the way I am. It's my nature." In a similar way I met another person who tried to excuse his prejudice. "I can't help it," he said, "I'm just prejudiced."

In using such excuses however, we are denying ourselves and other human beings the one privilege that we have over other living things, the ability to choose, to decide one way or the other.

Ross Snyder in his book entitled, "On Becoming Human," puts it this way, "You were born to become a unique, particular expression of a human being. And you are the only one who can make something of your one life on earth. You had nothing to say about where and when you were born, or of what parents. And all your life, world events and situations not of your own making will set conditions in which you must make your way. But you remain in charge of your decisions and what you intend to mean in those events."

The young man who saw the keys in the car did not have to get into the car and drive it away. Aaron did not have to collect the jewelry from the people and put it into the fire in order to make a golden calf.

A few years ago, it was popular in this country to blame many of the ills of the younger generation on Dr. Spock. He was widely denounced as the principal cause of our generation of hippies, societal dropouts, pot-smokers, and other problems. It caused the Wall Street Journal to write an editorial entitled, "Don't Blame Everything on Dr. Spock." And we can't, just as Aaron couldn't blame his irresponsibility on the fire that made the golden calf.

We do not have to be superhuman to do the right and decent things, to make the right decisions. We need only to be ordinary human beings willing to think and work at making the right choices.

The Old and New Testaments of the Bible call us to grow into mature responsible human beings. The Bible affirms that human beings have the ability to make choices and that we are able to choose wisely and decide responsibly. We don't have to be wicked or foolish. We have an option. We can act in ways which draw us nearer to life or to death. In fact, we exercise our humanness through responsible decision-making. The buck stops with each of us. God trusts us to make decisions. We can choose to love or to hate, to be honest or dishonest, to save lives or to kill.

Christianity has always held persons accountable for their behavior. Jesus taught that a person was responsible for his life and for his relationship to his neighbor. When troubled peop1e came to Jesus for help, he did not suggest that they blame others for their predicament or that they wait for someone else to rescue them.

The interesting thing in the whole Watergate scandal is that some chose dishonesty and deceit, but others did not. And some of those who chose dishonesty attempted like Aaron to blame it on the situation, on the environment around them. Everybody's doing it, so why blame me, after all I'm only human. They forgot to mention that they had a choice.

All too often we put ourselves into a current which is sweeping on a certain way, then lie still and let the current do the rest, and in all such cases it is easy to ignore or forget the first steep, which was that we chose that current. We always have a choice.

One of the inmates of a German concentration camp wrote this of his observations: "We who lives in the camps can remember the men who walked through. the huts comforting others, giving away their last pieces of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of human freedoms, the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

The young man who stole the car and his mother both need to face this truth. What he did was not the only human alternative. He had a choice. He could have reasoned — which only humans can do — what the consequences of his action would be; or better, he could have acknowledged that the car belonged to some.one else and logically determined that he would not steal. Then his mother could have proudly and justly said, "He didn't steal! After all, he's a human being!"

That's what the message of the Bible is all about. It is the business of our religious faith not to condemn humanity, but to reclaim it. It is the church's purpose to redeem persons from inhumanity and lead us to true humanity.

This does not mean that we deny that evil and sin exist. No, we admit they exist! We know there are temptations all around us all the time. We know that we have to make difficult decisions between right and wrong. Sin remains a fact of the condition of our existence. So, we recognize it and deal with it. This means on the positive side that we accept responsibility for our actions and decisions. That's what it means to be truly human.

This is a large part of what salvation means — realizing our fullest potential under God as human beings, that is living up to the best God h.as in mind for us. To be fully human according to the Bible, is a high calling, an exalted role from which much is expected. Therefore, to say, “After all, I’m only human,” is an attitude not worthy of us. It can be an abdication which rejects responsibility and expects someone else to do our living and make our decisions for us.

Amid all the dehumanizing forces in life, people are today crying out for a discovery and recovery of their true humanity. “I’m a human being,” cried out a student carrying a sigh which went on to say, “I do not fold, spindle or mutilate me.”

To be fully human is to be created in the image of God. The Bible depicts Jesus Chr.st as the fulfillment of our humanity. He shows us what we are truly meant to be.

So, to say, “I’m only human” is not an excuse for our past sins or mistakes — rather to say, “I’m a human being,” is an opportunity for our present salvation and a hope-filled future. Accept your humanity — it is a gift from God. And this means accepting the fact that God wants us to be responsible decision-making persons. Amen.