Book 11

Sunday October 17, 1982

"WHERE DOES OUR GOODNESS COME FROM?" Psalm 8:1-9, Acts 17: 24-28

We've all heard the saying, "Everyone has some good in them." Not long ago, a friend of mine gave me a article from a magazine which supports this belief. The title of the article was "On Altruism," and its author was Dr. Lewis Thomas. Dr. Thomas is president of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, but he is perhaps more widely known as a writer and medical philosopher. His book, "The Lives of A Cell," won the National Book Award. His latest book is entitled-- "The Medusa and the Snail," with the subtitle, "More Notes of a Biology Watcher."

But back to the magazine article, "On Altruism." To be altruistic is to be public-spirited, self-sacrificing, generous, other-directed, unselfish, or what we today would call just plain good.

In the essay, Dr. Thomas points out that altruism has always been one of biology's deep mysteries." Why should any animal, off on its own, specified and labeled by all sorts of signals as its individual self, choose to give up its life in aid of another being?"

"At first glance, it seems an unnatural act, a violation of nature, to give away one's life, or even one's possessions to another. And yet in the face of improbability, examples of altruism abound." Here are some examples according to Dr. Thomas. "When a worker bee, patrolling the frontiers of the hive, senses the nearness of an intruder, its attack is pure, unqualified suicide; the bee's sting is barbed, and in the act of pulling away, the insect is fatally injured. Among other varieties of social insects, like ants and higher termites, there are castes of soldiers for whom self-sacrifice is an everyday chore."

Now we might say that altruism is the wrong word for such behavior. After all, it's a human word, for creatures who can think and make decisions and a honeybee has no connection to creatures like us, no brain for figuring out the future, no way of knowing the outcome of that sting.

But Dr. Thomas points out that the mind of a single bee, not to mention the 50,000 or so connected minds of a whole

hive, is not so easy to dismiss. A bee can tell the time of day, calculate the geometry of the sun's position, argue with other bees about the best location for the next swarm, even anticipate the movements of a Princeton biologist who is shifting a dish of sugar further and further from the hive. Bees do a lot of close observing of other bees; maybe they know what follows stinging and do it anyway.

Altruism is not restricted to the social insects, according to Thomas. Birds risk their lives and sometimes lose them, in efforts to distract the attention of predators from the nest. Among baboons, zebras, moose, and other animals, there are always stubborn, doomed guardians, prepared to be done in first in order to buy time for the herd to escape.

It is genetically determined behavior, no doubt about it, says Lewis Thomas. Animals have genes for altruism and those genes have been selected in the evolution of many creatures because of the advantage they confer for the continuing survival of the species.

Some believe that this kind of altruism is based on kinship; by preserving kin, one preserves one's self. But what is kinship? How far does it extend? First cousins, second cousins? At what point do genetic ties to each other become so remote that we feel no instinctual urge to help? On the other hand, there are those who argue that altruistic behavior among human beings has nothing to do with genetics, that there is no such thing as a gene for self-sacrifice, not even a gene for helpfulness, or concern, or even affection. These are attributes, they say, that must be learned from society, acquired by cultures, taught by example.

Lewis Thomas, however, argues that precisely the opposite is true; we get along together in human society because we are genetically designed to be social animals, and we are obliged by instructions from our genes to be useful to each other. When we behave badly, killing or maiming, or stealing, or committing other anti-social activities, we are acting on misleading information learned from the wrong kinds of society we put together. It is our cultures that are deformed and this keeps us from paying attention to

what our genes are telling us. This is exactly what St. Paul was saying in another way in his letter to the Christians in Rome. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Dr. Thomas takes the argument even further. "I have no difficulty in imagining a close enough resemblance among the genes of all human beings, of all races and geographical origins, to warrant a biological mandate for each of us to do whatever we can to keep the rest of the species alive. I maintain, despite the moment's evidence against the claim, that we are born and grow up with a fondness for each other, and that we have genes for that."

"We can be talked out of that fondness, for the genetic message is like a distant music, and some of us are hard of hearing. Societies are noisy affairs, drowning out the sound of ourselves and our connection. Hard of hearing, we go to war; stone deaf, we make thermonuclear missiles. Nonetheless the music is there, waiting for more listeners."

The Christian faith has from the beginning proclaimed that we are born with a basic goodness in us and that we are brothers and sisters, no matter what our racial characteristics or ethnic origin.

This basic goodness or altruism that is within each one of us can be described in several ways. The Psalmist in the Old Testament wrote about human beings--"Thou hast made them little less than God, and dost crown them with glory and honor." And in the book of Genesis we are told that God created us as good. St. Paul proclaimed in his sermons as recorded in the book of Acts, "The God who made the world and everything in it, does not live in shrines made by human beings, nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since God gives to all people life and breath and everything. . . In God we live and move and have our being."

In other words, we human beings have goodness built right into us from the beginning because we are made in God's image and God dwells within each one of us. The noise of the world often crowds out this fact.

Jesus knew himself to be an expression of God and he tried as best he could to show and teach everyone he met that they were also an expression of God, and that being so, had goodness built in.

Unfortunately the Christian Church has not always proclaimed that message. Instead the church has too often only told us that we are miserable sinners and forgot about the goodness. In the New Testament stories, however, Jesus never called anyone a sinner. Rather he always saw the good in people. He forgave their sins to be sure, and at the same time called people to fulfill their highest potential as children of God.

You've seen the highway signs which say, "Repent, The End is Near." Some are well placed near treacherous hairpin turns with a thousand-foot-drop embankment along the side. The end may be nearer than we think. Yet, I think such signs give the wrong emphasis of the Christian message. Jesus never tried to scare people into believing.

Rather he tried to show people that there was a better way to an abundant life. Certainly he called on people to repent, but not out of fear, but rather to turn and realize that they were God's creatures and that God dwelled in them and among them.

To repent and turn in another direction does not mean to forsake all hope of abundant living and resign oneself to sackcloth and ashes. It means to turn from the "broad way" of worldly pursuits that only feed the hunger of the physical person, but starve the soul and spirit. It means to realize that life is lived from within out. To repent, means to open the eyes of spiritual perception and see life in a new dimension, to see hidden realities behind every appearance.

Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." This new freedom is not license to live without restraints, but inward motivation to tame the raw spiritual power that is within us, to harness our divine potential, and to move in the direction of our highest good. The goodness in us comes from God and it needs to be recognized, and celebrated.

The heart and core of Jesus' teaching concerned not so much his divinity, but the divinity of all human beings; the fact that we are all children of God.

Jesus said to the people he met, "You are a child of God, but you haven't known it. You have been acting the part of weakness, but you are really strong. Accept this goodness in you and go and sin no more."

There are no bad or weak people, there are only good people expressing themselves incompletely and strong people frustrating their potential of strength.

Watch the way we treat our children and we can see our own emphasis on badness and weakness rather than strength and goodness. The unruly child reminds the parent of weakness in himself, so make the child stay in his room till he or she learns a lesson. What lesson? That the child is bad and weak? If a parent doesn't believe that all children are innately good and strong, what hope is there for society?

Or a child comes running into the house after he has been playing in the dirt. His parent says, "You dirty little boy." But he is not a dirty boy at all. He is a boy with dirty hands and face. Bathe him and dress him and we find revealed the nice little boy that he has always been beneath the surface.

A philosopher once said that when we take a person as he or she is, we can make that person worse; but when we take a person as if he or she were already what they should be, we make that person what he can be.

There is goodness built into each one of us from the moment of our creation. It is in our genes from the beginning.

There is also a fondness for each other built into us from the beginning because we are all related to each other. We have a common ancestry. Biology and physics tell us this as does the Christian faith. We have more cousins than we can count, and they are all over the place, run by genes so similar to ours that the differences are only minor technicalities. As Dr. Thomas puts it, "All of us--men, women, children, fish, sea grass, sandworms, dolphins, hamsters, and soil bacteria, everything alive on our planet--roll ourselves along through all the generations by replic-

ating DNA and RNA, and although the alignments of nucleotides within these molecules are different in different species, the molecules themselves are fundamentally the same substance. We make our proteins in the same old way, and many of the enzymes most needed for cellular life are everywhere identical." The new ~~xxxx~~ physics puts it this way--"All the known forces in nature are manifestations of one basic interaction and that once, long ago, all were part of a single universal force or process." We all have a common ancestry. God is our creator.

Thus goodness or altruism is not only built into us but is required of us. As human beings, we have an enormous family to look after. This morning celebrate the goodness that is in you for it comes from God.