



“A Human Point of View”

Ezekiel 17:22-24

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

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Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Paul says that he no longer regards anyone from a human point of view, now that God through Christ has reconciled the world, so for the past week I've been asking myself what it means to regard someone in this way, not just in Paul's world, but in our own. I've come to believe that to regard someone from a human point of view is to regard them without love, and therefore to regard them not as a human being but as a thing, an object, a slogan, an instrument for our own gain.

- A human point of view fueled Jim Crow for a hundred years, and powers the continuance of racism, sexism, and homophobia in 2018. It divides us so that we don't see people as people but as “those people,” those people over there. I mean, can you believe what those people are doing?
- A human point of view enables this country to split up families and deport people to countries they have not seen for decades, to places they fled because of gangs and domestic violence.
- A human point of view allows this country to arrest asylum seekers and take their children away at the border.
- A human point of view denies basic services to couples who are getting married because they are of the same gender.

- A human point of view means that I don't see your humanity, because you represent something that I don't like; because you represent some threat, some loss; because hating you is what distracts me from my own shame.

A couple years ago I had to take a break from Facebook because I kept getting into fights with people over politics. For example, a woman who fifteen years ago was a teenage girl who sat behind me in homeroom posted Deut. 22:5 onto her account, "A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment." She posted this verse as a way to support of the so-called North Carolina Bathroom Bill, HB2, that sought to force transgender individuals to use the bathroom of the sex they were assigned at birth. In response, I asked if she had read Deut. 22:11, which comes just 6 verses later, where the Lord commands, "You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together," and I asked if she had checked all the labels in her closet. Now granted, I still think that's a pretty good comeback to her oppressive use of Scripture, but the point is this, I hadn't seen this person in years, and frankly, years ago, when we knew each other, she had been one of the few teenagers of a particular, popular clique in high school who was kind to me when I was this awkward adolescent boy. The friendship that we had, the person she was and who she is now, I didn't regard any of that. When I saw that post, I only saw a religious-political slogan that I disagreed with and a person I wanted to humiliate. I saw it, and I saw her, through a human point of view, which means I didn't regard her as a person at all.

Does it feel today that this is easy to do, not to see each other, but to see *the* other, to see people not as people but as *them*, over there, those people? I mean, can you believe what those people are doing? It's in the air today; all around us, people treated as things, instruments, as thugs, as less than human. Because power is being abused every day, I find myself often tempted

to do the same thing, to divide this world between us and them, to forget the humanity of people I disagree with.

“We regard no one from a human point of view,” says Paul, because “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old had passed away; see, everything has become new!” And I wonder how he says this, because for Paul, also, it would have been easy to divide; he was writing to a divided community after all, a community where there were a lot of people he disagreed with. Just a few chapters before our reading today, he asks them to forgive someone who had publicly denounced him. At the beginning of the book, he says that he had recently wanted to visit the community but decided not to, because an earlier visit had been too painful. The Corinthian community was one where he was sometimes criticized, sometimes mocked. There seems to be a side of people who liked Paul and then a few sides who followed some other teaching, some other way. In Chapter 10, verse 10 Paul writes of the gossip he has been hearing: “For they say, ‘[Paul’s] letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.’” He mentions these arguments again in Chapter 12, verse 20: “For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish...I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.” And yet to this divided church, where Paul had his share of antagonists, he does not dehumanize anyone but rather proclaims reconciliation. He gives here those famous lines of Scripture, a stunning summation of the Gospel: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to God’s self, not counting their trespasses against them, but entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” He proclaims, in the midst of division, that our world is being reconciled by love, so that the old way of shame, of pointing the finger, of making people into objects, may pass away.

But Paul's answer is not so easy as simply stop dehumanizing, start reconciling, because when I think of those times I have sought to divide and dehumanize, I recognize there has been something lurking deeper. I find that my human point of view is so often fueled by my own insecurity, that when I treat people as less than people, it is because I am fighting my own anxiety, my own demons. I think of what was going on in my life in 2015, right before that self-imposed break from Facebook, when I kept picking fights with people from my past. It was a time of anxiety. I remember that I was scared because I was finishing a degree and I didn't know what was going to come next, where I would be in the next year. So, while I was fighting what I assumed to be the good fight on Facebook, what I was really fighting against was a gnawing insecurity inside myself. What battle are you fighting within right now?

And today, in our present time of anxiety, as much as we are tempted to turn other people into slogans or opponents, I wonder if we are at the same time fighting the temptation to do the same to ourselves, to treat yourself as less than a full and complex and beloved person. Because sometimes these days I'm tempted to belittle myself, to turn myself into a series of comparisons, or slogans; to turn myself over to shame. Do you ever find yourself asking: Am I where I am supposed to be? Do I look like I should? Do I weigh too much or too little? Am I a success in other people's eyes? Do you ever regard yourself from a human point of view? The temptation to do so meets us every time we turn on the television; we turn on computer; we look around the room.

We shame ourselves, even when we should know better. Roxane Gay is a social critic and feminist who so potently critiques our human point of view even as she is honest about how it entices her. Her recent book *Hunger* is a memoir of her life living as a Black woman in a body that our medical culture terms obese.

“It would be easy to pretend I am just fine with my body as it is,” writes Roxane Gay. “I wish I did not see my body as something for which I should apologize or provide explanation. I’m a feminist and I believe in doing away with the rigid beauty standards that force women to conform to unrealistic ideals. I believe we should have broader definitions of beauty that include diverse body types. I believe it is so important for women to feel comfortable in their bodies, without wanting to change every single thing about their bodies to find that comfort. I (want to) believe my worth as a human being does not reside in my size or appearance. I know, having grown up in a culture that is generally toxic to women and constantly trying to discipline women’s bodies, that it is important to resist unreasonable standards for how my body or any body should look.” But, the author writes, “What I know and what I feel are too very different things.”<sup>1</sup>

And that’s the power of the human point of view, the view that judges us on a surface level and divides us, that turns us against each other and against ourselves. Even when we know better, when we know it’s over-simplistic or artificial, it still pulls at the heart; it revives our shame. It tells us that we are less than, that others are less than, that we and they do not deserve love or grace or reconciliation. The human point of view thrives in shame and degradation, and look around, look inside, it is all around us today, this point of view.

The new creation feels distant; living into this call to care for one another, to be grace-full to ourselves is not easy; the ministry of reconciliation is complex in a world where so many people are not handled with grace. A seminary professor named Robert Dykstra was once a 16-year-old boy with terrible acne across his back that he hid from everyone. He writes, “I cringed one day when my minister casually touched my shoulder, because it hurt. He asked why I

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<sup>1</sup> Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*. (New York: Harper, 2017), p. 17.

flinched. I didn't respond. He had a long memory, however, and days later asked if he could see my back. I told him no. He wanted to know why, but again I would not say. We played this game for a while, so great was my shame...We were together in the church sanctuary, of all places, when I lifted my shirt for him. He told me that he was sorry I had suffered this alone...and that he thought it would help for me to see a doctor, which to that point I had not done. Thus, would begin my years of antibiotics and some tangible relief from an embodied source of my shame.”<sup>2</sup>

This was a moment of healing for Robert Dykstra, a ministry of care and concern for a shame that Dykstra wore in his skin. And yet, Dykstra goes on to point out the problematic approach of his pastor, asking to see this teenage boy's back and not taking no for an answer. We must care for one another, in all the messiness that that entails, says Dykstra, but we must also be more careful of each other's vulnerability. With the history of sexual abuse by clergy, we must be care-full with each other's vulnerable bodies, where we often carry our shame, because finding and showing love in the places where we have felt shame requires trust, but trust has too often been broken.

In these days as the #MeToo movement reveals how many powerful and trusted men abused the power they were given, how they used their status to objectify and humiliate, we are called to be more careful with each other's vulnerability. To be more careful, but also, as a part of that care, to call out abusive people and institutions that treat others like objects, like things, like instruments for their own gain or pleasure. Being invited into the ministry of reconciliation means calling out the human view of objectification, of abuse, wherever it is practiced, when we practice it against others, when we practice it against ourselves, when we see the human point of view in full force in trusted places, like the church, like this country.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Dykstra, Allan Hugh Cole Jr., Donald Capps, *Losers, Loners, and Rebels: The Spiritual Struggles of Boys*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 66.

We are living in a time right now when Paul's vision of the new creation seems distant, the abuse of power and the abuse of people so widespread: everywhere you turn, violence against women, violence against Black communities, violence against immigrants, and immigrant children, violence against ourselves. So Paul's letter, then, today, is a call to see the humanity of one another, of ourselves; it's a call to raise our voices when people aren't treated like people, when people are not treated as the complex and beloved persons that they are to God. "We regard no one from a human point of view," says Paul, because "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to God's self through Christ." The work of God in Christ calls us to a new way of being with each other, with ourselves, a way of love for one another, and for ourselves, where we treat one another as if we truly believed that all, that everyone, is a beloved child of God - that you are a child of God, that I am a child of God, that the person you pass in the street, that the families crossing the desert who you see on TV, that the children you cannot see because they are behind detention center walls, that all, that everyone, that everyone, is a beloved child of God.

We, in this very moment in our lives, no matter how small or how big it may feel, we are invited to the work of reconciliation, in small and in great steps. You are called to make this world less empty for someone, for yourself. "Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Thanks be to God.