

Caring for Neighbors: Vocation, responsibility and community

Gathering

HYMN

(See hymn suggestions on p. 119)

PRAYER

Almighty and Eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you. Then, we pray, use us to your glory and the welfare of your people, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 86)



HEARING THE WORD

Genesis 1:1-31

DISCERNING THE WORD

Silence

Discernment

What did you hear in this reading? Is there a word of God for us here?

Introduction

Session summary

This session explores how the study of genetics affects broad human self-understanding, and how Christians understand their God-given vocation. It explores the relation of humans to the rest of nature, and then reminds us about the global scope of genetic developments—developments experienced in a variety of ways by people in different parts of the global village. It also discusses the problems of sin, failure, and human limitation. It concludes by charting the meaning of God’s love that washes over us in our baptism, giving us profound vocational direction. This direction calls us to love and responsibility that seeks to bring out the potential good of genetics rather than the potential harm.



Real life stories

1. At the August 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, Bishop Steven Ullestad of the Northeastern Iowa Synod introduced a request for the ELCA to create a social statement on genetics by telling the story of a microbiologist from his synod.

Ullestad remarked that this Lutheran biologist once told him: “Bishop, I have prayed every night for three years: God, why have you allowed me to see what I see each day but you have given me nowhere to talk about the implications of my work for the world and my faith?” Ullestad then went on to say, “As the conversation continued it became clear to me that in his work he was worried about doing good for all people and caring for creation. He was concerned that his research not serve human arrogance or just economic gain. I also realized that he represented many, many in our congregations whose lives as scientists, farmers, and parents intersect with this knowledge and power. “I pray,” concluded Ullestad, “that this church will take up the challenge, difficult as it is, to speak humbly but clearly on these matters.”

2. *Cracking the Code of Life*, Segment 1: Instructions for a Human Being (Begin at: minute 4:10 and run to 10:06)



The word “rule” used of the sun and the moon in v.16 and the word “dominion” used of men and women in v.28 have the same meaning: to regulate or order their divinely assigned sphere of influence.

What kind of interrelations are there among the plants, trees, creatures of the earth, the seas, and the air?

The big picture

In the previous session we noted that the age of genetics raises the question of identity and is global in its impact. We could call these “big picture factors.” We begin, then, thinking about what genetics means for the broad topic of human self-understanding. What do genetic developments reveal about human identity and the nature of life in the twenty-first century?

Humans as nature and their role as shapers of nature

The work of the Human Genome Project (HGP) symbolizes scientific efforts of recent decades that have shown how our human species emerged within the unfolding of a vast, huge, and ancient system that science calls “nature.” Christians, as a statement of faith, understand nature as God’s creation and, therefore, as good. The knowledge gained from genetic science helps make clear that humans are thoroughly dependent upon the processes that shape the rest of nature. Nucleotide sequences (DNA) should not be understood as mechanical, but they are clearly the physical foundation upon which our being human depends both for its constitution and its development. The nucleotide sequencing that the HGP has “mapped” undergirds everything from the cell structure of the simplest organism to basic personality temperament. It has even been demonstrated that we share 99.5% of our genes with the chimpanzee and other primates. Humans are nature!

Humans, like the rest of nature, should not be “reduced” to these sequences or processes. Moreover, humans have some unique genes and unprecedented characteristics compared to the rest of nature. Still, these sequences and the history embedded in the genetic code demonstrate that humans have undergone the same processes of generation, diversity, and selection as the rest of nature. The complexity of these sequences and processes is astounding scientists as they learn how complex the symphony of interaction with both other genes and the social environment is. As Christians, we also understand that all of this comes forth by God’s creative Word. Yet that point only enhances the recognition that humans *are* nature, created within the same web of life. (Psalm 104:1-35).

The fact that humans are part of God’s great enterprise called creation is related to the idea, suggested in the previous session, that humans have emerged within nature to care for it and help shape it. This is evident in many ways. Dogs, for example, exist only because of human intervention. Wolves, coyotes, and fox would exist if the human race did not, but dogs exist only because humans have bred them, beginning with those canine relatives, over long periods of time. Contemporary society as we know it, with nuclear power, artificial lakes, artificial physical elements, climate change, and biotechnology evidences the immense power of humans to shape nature. Human efforts—technology in this general sense—represent an ongoing outgrowth of and development of God’s creation.

This human shaping of nature can be captured by the term “technology.” We tend to think of technology as the computer screen in front of us or the souped-up engine roaring down the street, but technology is far more than just the things humans create. Technology is the use of the mechanical arts and applied sciences to fulfill “a desire and disposition rationally to understand, order, predict, and (ultimately) control the events and workings of nature all pursued for the sake of human benefit.”¹

Given the immense power of today’s technology, it is important to realize that civilization is an outgrowth of nature’s unfolding. At the same time, particularly in the last century, it has become true that there is no aspect of nature that is not affected, fundamentally, by human civilization. All of this has become possible through the immense capacity of the human imagination coupled with the global power of technology.

The science and technology of genetics continues along this historic path of human development and is now shaping the earthly creation in unprecedented ways. There are many examples of this, but germ line engineering is one of the most common illustrations. In this process, researchers directly engineer sequences of DNA in germ line cells, cells like a fertilized egg, which means these changes will be passed down to future offspring. In this sense, it changes the basic genetic “code” of life. Breeding practices of the

Human Genome Project (HGP): an international research effort (led in the United States by the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Energy) to sequence the base pairs, identify the genes, and understand the human genome. The initial goal for this work was completed in 2000.

past created change in the “code” over years of trial and error, but germ line engineering directly alters it in one action.

Most people know about this from reports about genetically engineered plants such as corn or soybeans. (Many more organisms have been or will be engineered.) The point here is that the modification made to the DNA of those seeds is direct, immediate, irreversible, and will be present in all subsequent generations. Or to use common examples, the nature of engineered corn or soy has now been shaped differently by humans. Scientists predict that it will be possible to alter some aspects of the human germ line within the next 20 years or so. Humans are becoming shapers of human nature as well.

The global realities of genetics

This shaping of nature does not happen in a vacuum; it takes place within complex sets of social and economic forces. This reality is often described as the “global village,” and it has great significance for developments in genetic science.

The image of the global village suggests three realities. The first is easily understood and commonly recognized: all people on earth are becoming ever more closely connected. The decision whether to use genetically modified seed affects not only what is in U.S. breakfast cereal but also what kind of seeds are available for African farmers. Or, in another example, oil prices, weather-related factors, and the robust U.S. demand for ethanol created new levels of hunger and new political instabilities in places like Haiti and Bangladesh, places already struggling with poverty and hunger. We live in a complicated global village, and decisions made in one part of the village, like ripples spreading across a lake, affect the whole village.

However, the image of the global village points to more than close connections. We who live in the United States often find it difficult to stay attuned to what others in the global village are experiencing. This is particularly true with respect to genetics where other peoples’ experience is often quite different from our own. Many in the global village do not have, and likely will not have, access to the fruits of genetic research, and decisions in the developed countries to focus on genetic research may have a negative impact on their basic needs. Many developing countries have crucial needs that do not require genetic solutions. Their needs have to do with issues of infrastructure, better food distribution, clean water, adequate housing, and medicine delivery for malaria, TB, or HIV-AIDS. Voices from some of these countries speak out against genetic research and development because it diverts attention and research from basic needs, primarily because its potential for profit is greater. While this negative experience and the factors involved cannot be adequately addressed in a few sentences, we need to at least be aware of the issues—they are important within the global village.

The third and related reality in the global village is that many of the decisions that affect everyone are often made by a relatively small number of individuals. Decisions, including what to research and where to direct the attention of science, are made in the interplay of many actors and forces, but key decisions are driven by a relatively small group of scientists, managers, and administrators in governments, industries, and universities. Moreover, their decisions are often directed to a specific interest group and focused on enhancing profits and advancing careers. What may get only secondary consideration is the common good and outcomes that may have profound impacts on multitudes of people.

The hidden power of small networks of decision makers is often overlooked, but it takes on concrete reality in the lives of multitudes both here and abroad:

- the newly married man, worried about keeping his health insurance if a certain genetic marker is found indicating susceptibility to colon cancer;
- the consumer wondering if family allergies will be affected by unlabeled food;
- farmers in Africa who may want to try engineered seeds, but who cannot afford to pay for them year after year as required by seed companies. (In the past these farmers have saved seed back after the harvest.)

Social Location refers to the idea that human beings are “located” in many social relationships and identities that shape their self-understanding, values and aspirations, and their perceptions of others and the world. Examples of these relationships include race/ethnicity; socio-economic class; gender; religious affiliation; mental/physical abilities; and age.

- family members of those with Parkinson’s disease who hope that genetic research will find a cure that will end or slow the disease;
- small business persons and local farmers in Mexico who have had to go to court to retain access to generations-old yellow beans (a particular variety of bean for which a company claimed they had a patent. (See session A1: Real life stories).

Each of these situations concretely demonstrates that human beings as a species are shapers of nature. Each also demonstrates that every day decisions related to genetics are made within the context of social and economic forces beyond the immediate control of most individuals. It is within this context, or “place” that our individual and social responsibilities play out today.

More Christian resources

Given what we are learning about human beings and the nature of our global village, what additional Christian resources help form the basis of Christian self-understanding and analysis for living in these times?

Christian vocation

Christian self-identity and reflection about life begin, always, with what God has done in Christ. The first session reminded us of this by framing the big picture of God’s creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work. That work becomes personal for each of us in our baptism and is constantly renewed through our lives in the church, the community of Word and Sacrament. The broad story of God’s love is specifically applied to *each* of us, if you will, in the Christian community when we are baptized. This sacrament of Word and water submerges the baptized in the work of God through Jesus Christ’s, life, death, and resurrection and jumpstarts each Christian’s vocation.

Christian vocation is a word frequently misunderstood. Many think that only those who are pastors or rostered leaders have a Christian vocation. But Lutherans understand that vocation is “a calling from God that encompasses all of life for all the faithful.”² It involves God’s saving call to each of us to live a vocation, a life, in joyful response to God’s love. In gratitude to God *the* single Christian vocation for each and every baptized person is to serve God in everything that we do. We understand from scripture that God’s desire is that we love the neighbor, seek justice, and promote the common good. For this we are called by God and accountable.

The single Christian vocation, then, is lived out in a variety of *callings*. It is lived out in the various role and “places” of responsibility each Christian finds him or herself. Each Christian’s callings are particular to the skills, education, *social location*, special roles, and other such factors particular to that individual’s life. In addition to particular callings, like our job or parenthood, all of us are called to *general* responsibilities such as being wise consumers, involved citizens, or good global neighbors. Each role brings with it appropriate tasks and practices that we are to fulfill. Each of these roles has “best practices and structures of responsibilities” that guide us in service to the neighbor, and there is great variety in these. Examples of such callings in relation to genetics include:

- biotech scientist
- parent who has to decide which genetic test or therapies to use
- genetics counselor
- farmer who must decide whether to purchase transgenic (genetically engineered) seeds
- member of watchdog organizations that challenge particular uses of genetic knowledge as unwise or unjust
- financial officer of a biotech firm
- legislator

Some of these roles may bring individuals into conflict at times, but God needs each one and each should be engaged in with prayerful discernment. In each case, the Christian vocation is to live out his or her callings in ways that bless God and serve the neighbor in the actions taken.

Recognizing sin

As noted in session A1, the need for a critical analysis of the use of genetics follows from the reality of sin about which the Christian story is clear-eyed. Our faith insists we recognize the depth of sin that haunts all human activity, including genetic developments. Sin is sometimes thought of as a list of “don’ts and dos,” but the Lutheran understanding considers sin in broader terms. Sin describes the brokenness of our world, both personal and social.

In Luther’s discussion of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, this brokenness is discussed fundamentally as a matter of our trust orientation to God. Sin is trust in self or in all “the wrong places” rather than in God. Sin manifests itself in various ways. Sin is being “curved in on one’s self.” That is, it is being self-focused at the expense of being in right relationship with God or neighbor, which is idolatry. Sin also describes our condition of ignoring God’s calling to service and love because of our bondage to fears, ambitions, and anxiety. It is crucial to recognize that sin describes more than personal or individual actions since it includes social and structural realities. Collective beliefs, practices, systems and institutions are also tainted by the brokenness named sin. The challenge here is to recognize that all kinds of human efforts are tainted by sin.

Such talk may seem theoretical but it has practical implications. Christian analysis, for instance, argues that the deepest challenge in the age of genetics is not the dilemmas associated with the study of genetics per se, but rather the radical extension of human power over nature and the ways that power can be exercised in sinful ways. In other words, Christian faith hones in on the deepest cause of potential harm—the moral fault or the sin—that infects this exercise of power. This analysis reveals pointedly the dangers of human power exercised in a society shaped primarily by an ethics of self-fulfillment in which power increasingly becomes an end in itself. Such Christian analysis insists that these insights must influence how we carry out our human responsibility in the age of genetics, as well.

Ambiguity and confidence

While Christian faith recognizes the dangers of sin and thus gives an edge to critical evaluation, it does not negate the worth of human effort. In fact, it recognizes that good and sin are often mixed together in this life. No matter how full of sin and vulnerability they may be, human efforts do make a difference! Christian faith, then, continues to see genetic developments as part of God’s creative work, even if we cannot be sure how God will use our sin-tainted efforts. This too is the promise learned in the cross of Jesus—that God can use human sin for good. Even as Christian faith subjects human pride to critique, it equally motivates Christians to lives that move beyond inaction to seek healing and justice.

The Christian story also provides a benchmark for living amidst such ambiguity. The fullness of life revealed in Jesus Christ teaches us that all human action, including the development of genetic products and processes, should be congruent with *his* purpose. That is, the purpose of human life is self-giving for the benefit of creation and its people. This tenet from faith begins to provide Christians with the kind of questions we must use to evaluate genetic developments and determine the roles we will take. For instance: will this technology or marketing or service fulfill the common good of society or will its impact be limited or harmful? It also compels Christians to ask, about genetic developments and their delivery: who makes those decisions on behalf of whom? Christians will want to know how decisions are made and who is included in the process.

Human power today unfolds in a vivid tension between human creativity for potential benefit and human potential for creating peril. It exists in the tension between the pos-

From *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*: “... we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you [God] in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you without our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” (page 95)

sibilities of imagination and the dangers of misuse on a global scale. In response to such tensions, Christian faith recognizes that in Christ we, as his people, will sometimes be bewildered, even anguished decision makers. But it also teaches that we are at the same time redeemed decision makers. In the final analysis, this is the source of that Christian confidence which enables us to live with the ambiguities of our callings to responsibility. Decisions and callings may never be free of sin and limitation, but Christians need not fear that only righteous deeds will somehow make us right with God or save the world. This frees us to heed calls to responsibility and take up the tasks of critically engaging the unprecedented decisions and powers that genetic developments place before us.

Invitation to conversation, prayer, and action



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What do you understand by Christian vocation? Have you ever thought about the relation between your baptism and your Christian vocation? Name several of the callings you fulfill as part of your Christian vocation.
- In terms of genetics, what is the relation between the Christian vocation and various callings such as parent, scientist, farmer, financial officer?
- What do you think about the idea that Christians may sometimes be bewildered, even anguished, decision makers, keenly aware of limitations? What do you think about Christians as simultaneously redeemed decision makers? How is this helpful? How is it not?
- Action question: In which of your callings have you been most affected by the developments of genetics? What resources would help you fulfill your calling more effectively? How could your congregation help its members and communities to fulfill their callings better?

Closing prayers

INVITATION TO INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Pray for those who seek to know what God's will is for their lives, and pray for those who strive to live out their calling in faithfulness.

PRAYING WITH THE TRADITION

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(Prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi, who lived 1181-1226)

Endnotes

1 President's Council on Bioethics. *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*. (Washington, D.C.: October 2003), p.2.

2 "Our Calling in Education" A social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 2007, p.1.