

Human Power Today: Innovation and accountability before God

Gathering

HYMN

(See hymn suggestions on p. 119)

PRAYER

Into your hands, Almighty God, we place ourselves: our minds to know you, our hearts to love you, our wills to serve you. Into your hands, Incarnate Savior, we place ourselves: receive us and draw us after you that we may follow your steps; abide in us and enliven us by the power of your indwelling. Into your hands, O hovering Spirit, we place ourselves: take us and fashion us after your image. May your comfort strengthen, your grace renew, and your fire cleanse us in life and in death, in this world of shadows, and in your changeless world of light eternal, now and forever. Amen.

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 86)



HEARING THE WORD

Philippians 2:1-11

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 the important question of what it means to be a human being in light of our relationship to God, and with an eye on how advances in genetics are interpreted in our society. The first section identifies some troubling ways of thinking about human beings related to what might be called “the gene myth.” The second then sketches Christian ways to think about being human in relation to God, the creation, and to one another in the contemporary world.



Real life stories

1. Tina lost her hearing as a child. She attended schools for the deaf and learned American Sign Language, but is able to read lips and can speak fairly clearly. She grew up attending a Lutheran church where she was able to participate in worship only because of her ability to lip read. As an adult, she has found a congregation that includes a number of deaf members and has services that include sign language translation.

Since her college days at Gallaudet University, she has been active in the Deaf Culture movement, which views deafness not as a disability but as a kind of minority status similar to race, and also as a unique linguistic culture. Deaf Culture holds that there is nothing wrong with being deaf, only with how society has treated deaf people. While at Gallaudet, she was involved in protests over the appointment of a new university president who many students and professors believed was not sufficiently familiar with the culture of deafness, in part because she did not learn sign language until she was an adult.



Paul writes from prison to the Philippians. They are afraid he might die there. In these verses he proposes a way for them to live for Christ whether he is there or not.

What parallels do you hear between the ethical convictions Paul urges Christians to have (the mind of Christ Jesus) and the convictions that Christ Jesus had which brought him to the cross?

Theological anthropology is systematic thinking about what faith teaches about who human beings are and how we relate to God, others, and the rest of creation. In other words, it reflects on what Christians believe about human beings because of what they profess about God and God's work.

By *myth* here, we refer to a framework of assumptions or beliefs that surround science, but which have not themselves been scientifically demonstrated. The *gene myth* is a mindset that reduces everything significant about being human to the genes.

Tina is now hearing conflicting things from her friends and fellow activists about genetic testing and deafness. About 1 in 1,000 infants is born profoundly deaf and in about half of these cases, the deafness is due to a genetic cause. Mutations in many genes are involved, but the most common, accounting for about one in five deaf children, are those affecting connexin 26. Some in the Deaf Culture movement are concerned that the identification of genes that cause deafness coupled with new testing techniques will lead parents to choose not to have a baby because it would be born deaf. Others hope that the growing availability of preimplantation genetic diagnosis, (P.G.D.), a process in which embryos are created in a test tube and their DNA is analyzed before being transferred to a woman's uterus, will allow them to screen for genes that cause deafness, allowing them to choose a deaf child who will share in their culture.

Tina wonders whether it makes sense to allow these kinds of tests in either case. She wonders whether we should open the door to allowing people to select their children based on information about non-life threatening genetic traits just because technology may exist to do so. Should we open the door to allowing people to select their children based on information about non-life threatening genetic traits? She has discussed this with other members of her congregation and her activist group. Those in her congregation wonder what, if any, position their church has on this type of genetic testing and the potential for genetic selection of children.

2. *Cracking the Code of Life*_Segment 15: Genetic Modification (use minute 1:38:40 to 1:44:14)

How not to understand what it means to be a human being in this biotech century

The first two sessions of this study have explored what “is going on” in this biotech century, how we are all involved, and what is at stake. The next two sessions will explore ethical resources that Christians can draw on when evaluating choices regarding genetic research and development, which are likely to be the dominant mode of technological innovation in the foreseeable future.

Before we turn to ethical matters, however, we should explore some fundamental questions about ourselves as human beings. For Christians, the technical term for this kind of reflection is *theological anthropology*. Theological anthropology thinks about what it means to be human in light of what we know about who God is. Discussion about how we understand ourselves—our identity—may seem abstract, but in reality it dramatically and concretely affects daily decisions and judgments. Who we understand ourselves and others to be will directly affect what we do and how we relate to others. For example, if I perceive a homeless person as a child of God just like me, I am likely to respond to her in a way that is somewhat different than if I see her as “mentally ill,” or as “genetically determined.”

It's important from time to time to pay attention to questions of human identity. Only then can we decide which beliefs serve us well and which need revision. In particular, this first section explores some beliefs about genetics and human identity that are common in society, but that may be inaccurate or inappropriate.

Gene myth

Much of the confusion about genes and human identity results from what may be called the *gene myth*. The myth is that our true humanity, or at least everything important about us, is “all in the genes.” The statement “My genes made me do it” hints at this, even when said tongue-in-cheek. The idea that we are *determined* by our genes is another example of the myth.

There are several variations of this myth (for more discussion of this, see session B2), but the main problem presented by the myth is the idea that whatever is *truly* human about humans can be reduced to the genes. Simplistic media coverage contributes to this reductionism, but so does scientific talk.

Scientists must reduce the subject matter they study into simpler pieces for purposes of investigation. For this reason, researchers necessarily look at the genetic code in isolation. This can lead, though, to belief that human beings can be fully described by what the gene code does. For example James Watson, co-discoverer of the double helix in 1953, and Nobel Prize winner, once told *Time Magazine*: “We used to think our fate was in our stars. Now we know, in large measure, our fate is in our genes.”¹ Genes do have a great deal to do with who we are, but it is all too easy to slip from that fact into the gene myth.

More significantly, such beliefs often lead to harmful outcomes. For example, some scientific studies have blamed poverty and criminality on genes. Others have explained low intelligence with genetic data. Claims such as these are dangerous because they allow racial and sexual categories and complex social problems to be reduced to genetic causes. In other words, categories or problems that are social in character are passed off as “natural” problems about which little can be done. Any talk that hints of “genetic determinism” or “essentialism” worries people of faith since it is not only false, but leads to human arrogance, harm to others, and reduces a human being to an “it.”

Technological imperative and extreme individualism

Two other ideas have taken on new strength over the last two decades. The first is that of the *technological imperative* and the second is *extreme individualism*. Both are prominent beliefs or mindsets (working assumptions that frame thinking) in this society, and they must be named and appropriately challenged whenever they are used to champion genetic developments.

The technological imperative can be described simply. It is the belief or presumption that: “Because we can do something technologically, we should do it.” In other words, if new knowledge makes technology possible, then there is an imperative to make use of it. The general mindset of our culture supports the technological imperative. For example, this mindset can be seen in our eagerness to “let the market decide,” our emphasis on self-fulfillment, and our belief in the inherent goodness of change or unfettered enterprise.

Related to this technological mindset is a cultural emphasis on the rights of the individual. The concern for the individual and individual rights has brought many gifts to U.S. society, including an insistence on the dignity of the individual. It is problematic or even dangerous, however, when this concern for the individual becomes extreme. Extreme individualism can be defined as a mindset in which the individual self is seen as the all-important measure of life. Extreme individualism looks to the self for the meaning of life and for moral guidance. It makes absolute the values of self realization or self-fulfillment. It is exemplified in this society by the growing insistence on private choice, and can lead to the presumption that moral decisions should be made in terms of personal self-fulfillment alone. This mindset can be seen in the common phrase, “do your own thing.” Such extreme individualism contradicts biblical notions which stress the good of the human community as primary and fundamental.

There are many examples of the dangers that arise from linking the technological imperative with extreme individualism. One example can be seen in the area of reproductive choice. Reproductive choice is a good thing, but not when it is seen as an absolute. It can, in fact, become dangerous if the technological imperative is linked with extreme individualism. In that case, the fact that a new reproductive technology can be successfully marketed becomes sufficient justification for doing so, and for concluding that it is ethically acceptable. It is complicated. On the one hand, it seems right to give parents *all* options as they become possible and available. On the other hand, the desire for the “latest” and “best” for *my* child could lead to the practice of “designer babies,” and this practice could be a new form of *eugenics*.

The technological imperative: The mindset, belief, or presumption that because we can do something technologically, we should do it.

Eugenics literally means “good genes,” and the term can indicate simply the study of hereditary improvement. It usually refers, however, to any strategy for directing human evolution through the transmission of “desirable” traits while impeding the transmission of “undesirable” ones. The most well-known examples are the eugenic practices fostered by German Nazism. It must be pointed out, though, that many nations, including the U.S., have had eugenic programs. Eugenic strategies include selective mating, prenatal testing, selective abortion, forced sterilization, ethnic cleansing, and others.

Theological reflections on what it means to be a human being

Christian Contrasts

Christian views about what it means to be human before God look dramatically different in crucial ways from the views just discussed. In contrast to genetic reductionism, for instance, Christian anthropology understands human nature as fundamentally dynamic and relational. In contrast to extreme individualism, we learn from Christ that to be human is to participate in meaningful relationships. The biblical understandings of God, as summarized in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit teach us that God is relational. The first person of the Trinity is the Father of the Son, who in turn is the Son of the Father, while the Spirit is the one who proceeds from the Father and the Son (Nicene Creed). Only God is able to pull off this awesome relational mystery; to believe in a Trinitarian God is to believe in a relational God. No wonder relationships are inherent in nature in general (life thrives in relationships, in ecologies) and among human beings in particular! Being human is a collective and communal activity.

Again, rather than the focus on what genes determine, Christians focus on God's creative presence dynamically at work throughout the ongoing process of creation. Humans are created to participate in this creative process, a participation made possible in part through genes themselves! The human place in creation has too often been misunderstood as one of dominating and exploiting. But the point of Genesis 1:14-28 or Psalm 1:1-9 is to show the way that God relates to the creation and the blessings and vocations God gives to creation. All living creatures are given the vocation of being fruitful and multiplying. Three types of creation are given the task of regulating other types of creation. The sun regulates (rules) the day, establishing times and seasons, the moon regulates (rules) the night and human beings regulate (rule) birds, fish, and every living thing on the earth.

This regulation by men and women is to further the vocation of the rest of creation. By providing order, rather than chaos for the creatures, men and women support and maintain the fruitfulness of all of God's creatures. In the original language of the Old Testament, this ordering is not akin to domination as "lording it over everything." Rather it is a stewardship (a working under someone else's authority) according to the blessing and goodness God has already established in creation. In order to further the creation God gives human beings such gifts as knowledge and imagination so that we can be nurturing stewards. God's gifts enable human beings, in subtle yet fundamental ways, to even introduce novelty into God's ongoing creative enterprise for the purpose of serving in God's ongoing enterprise.

In stark contrast to those who think human beings can use these gifts to progress to a state of near perfection (even near-immortality!), however, Christian doctrine teaches a more realistic attitude. Lutheran Christians in particular adamantly profess that mortality and imperfection are integral to what it means to be human. A key idea in the Lutheran Reformation is that humans are always simultaneously "saint and sinner"—beloved and claimed by God at the same time that they are full of faults and limitations. Human efforts, while vitally important and needed for the good of society and creation, cannot ultimately change (save us from) this fundamental reality. Such a theological view provides a needed measure of humility to our bold aspirations. No genetic discovery or treatment will alter the fact that human beings are both precious and also mortal creatures. Can we respond to suffering and be creative while we are here? Absolutely! But as people of faith, we do not see (or seek!) immortality or absolute perfection in this life.

Jesus Christ as the true image of God for humanity

Central to the Christian understanding about what it means to be a human being is the non-negotiable conviction that all human beings are created in the image of God. Christian belief in the inalienable dignity of each human being is derived from that conviction. At the same time, however, Christian belief affirms that humans are bound by sin. Christians

recognize that human beings live in the tension between bearing the image of God and yet missing the mark (the target) of what God intends for us.

Jesus Christ is God's solution to that dilemma. By raising Christ, God frees us from the bondage to sin and makes possible our acting according to the image of God revealed in Christ. Christ Jesus, who did not consider equality with God something to be exploited, who was obedient even to death on the Cross and who was raised becomes our example since we now share the mind of Christ (Philippians. 2:1-11). In a perhaps surprising way, it may be said that in Christ God reveals to us who we actually are! By faith we participate in that image in an anticipatory way, and so Christians understand the image of God as both gift and calling, as grace and vocation.

The image of God has been equated with the human capacity to reason, and reasoning is important. But contemporary Lutherans tend to take their clues about this from scripture and the early Reformers, like Martin Luther, for whom God's image in humans was the potentiality to enter into relationship with God and to serve others and the earth. This becomes clear in the Reformation emphasis on God's love as the source of love that humans extend to the neighbor. It is also clear in Luther's admonishment to be "Christ's" to each other, which simply expresses the central purpose in life as loving the neighbor because, and as, Christ has loved us. The idea is not that every believer should become a clone of Jesus, but that we become the *kind* of human beings that Jesus Christ was, which is possible since his spirit dwells in us (e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, 1 Corinthians 6:19, Galatians 5:25).

The Christian understanding that God was incarnate in Jesus also teaches us that God became a particular human being, at a particular time in history, within a given culture. This same "particularity" is true of all human beings since each of us is shaped by historical, social, and economic contexts. We are not *determined* by these, but cultural values significantly shape not only individuals but also the institutions and manifestations of a people's spirit. This is important to remember when we talk about science and technology. They are shaped by the spirit of the culture that undertakes them. The type of biotechnology that we produce as a society, or even the types of research funded, will be dramatically influenced by the spirit behind them.

More than individual sin

A widely respected secular thinker, Francis Fukuyama, names a key fear of many regarding genetic developments when he says that:

[T]he deepest fear that people express about technology is...a fear that, in the end, biotechnology will cause us in some way to lose our humanity—that is, some essential quality that has always underpinned our sense of who we are and where we are going, despite all of the evident changes that have taken place in the human condition through the course of history. Worse yet, we might make this change without recognizing that we had lost something of great value. We might thus emerge on the other side of a great divide between human and post-human history and not even see that the watershed had been breached because we lost sight of what that essence was.²

Christians do not fear that the image of God will be lost in some kind of post-human history, but they do worry about the lure of society's idols. This lure has always been powerful, but it becomes even more so with increasing human power over the genome. They fear that, rather than embodying the good that God intends human power to serve, this expansion of human activity might end up putting our very bodies at the service of our economic and social idols.

Christians often think about sin at an individual level, but Christian teaching also points to the magnified power of sin in corporate endeavors. The lack of personal accountability within large scale activity can magnify sin's power and consequences. We must remember that genetic science and technology can be social instruments of God's creative and healing presence in the world, but they can also be an occasion for great harm. They can be pursued for the selfish interests of the few at the expense of the many.

Christians begin and end with the cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We should not look to human aspirations or to nature for marks of the divine to guide our ethics. Those places reflect back to us the idols we carry within. Through Christ we can perceive divine creativity and redemption at work in nature, and understand what it means to live out our vocation. In this sense, Christ is to be our guide in the age of genetics, as in every age. Guided by his example and in this confidence, Christians find a ground for choice and action in the age of genetics that balances risk and boldness with humility and caution.

Invitation to conversation, prayer, and action



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Choose one of the ways that genetics and human nature can be misunderstood as explored in section one above and discuss it. The following are some possible discussion starters:
 - What should the church's public stance be in relation to beliefs like the technological imperative or extreme individualism? How can it speak without appearing to be against enterprise and development?
 - In what ways is it helpful to identify these dangers as this society makes decisions regarding genetic developments?
- Choose one of the ways Christians talk about human beings as described in section two and discuss it. Here are some possible questions:
 - Do these discussions of the image of God and the place of sin seem consistent with scripture and with other Christian thinking?
 - In what ways are they helpful to you for thinking about decisions that must be made about the use of genetics in this society?
 - Are there aspects of these beliefs that should be very challenging to U.S. culture? What are some of those?
- Action question: How could you find out more about products being created using genetic technology? How could you and your congregation become more aware of legislation pending in your state or at the federal level that relate directly to genetics research and the use of genetic products, whether medical or agricultural? How could you study them? What action could be taken if this legislation seems faulty?

Closing prayers

INVITATION TO INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Pray for those who labor in making laws, enforcing laws, and in carrying out justice.

PRAYING WITH THE TRADITION

In you, Father almighty, we have our preservation and our bliss. In you, Christ, we have our restoring and our saving. You are our mother, brother, and savior. In you, our Lord, the Holy Spirit, is marvelous and plenteous grace. You are our clothing, for with love you wrap us and embrace us. You are our maker, our lover, our keeper. Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen.

(Prayer of Julian of Norwich, who lived about 1342 to 1413)

Endnotes

- 1 Jaroff, Leon. "The Gene Hunt." *Time Magazine* (March 1989), 67.
- 2 Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 101.