

2 February 2020
Genesis 2: 4-9; 2 Corinthians 12: 6-10
Human Wholeness
First Mennonite Church

In 2 Corinthians Paul said, “*a thorn was given me in the flesh*”. Much ink has been split over the nature of this thorn. Some speculate Paul had epilepsy or malaria while others say he had an eye problem. Some say Paul suffered from significant mental health issues. Still others say, this thorn wasn’t a physical illness but referred to opposition from his opponents or from his agony that his people, the Jewish people, by and large, rejected the gospel.



“Casting a Long Shadow” by Caryl Bryer Fallert (Bryerpatch Studios)

I don’t want to talk about Pauls’ thorn in the flesh today. Paul’s handicap, whatever it was, raises an important question, though. And the question is: What does it mean to be healthy and whole? Could Paul be considered healthy and whole even though he had a physical, mental, and/or a relational handicap?

When I think of being healthy, I think of not being sick. I don’t have a cold or flu; I don’t have any broken bones or incurable diseases. In other words, when I think of being healthy, I think of being **physically** healthy. When I’m physically healthy, I am whole.

But, we all know that there is more to being healthy and whole than just physical health. Yes, physical health is important, and I am deeply grateful to God for this gift. Besides physical health there is mental health, emotional and spiritual health, and even relational health.

Before we ask what it means to be healthy and whole, we need to ask two other questions first. And those questions are...

1. What is Biblical model of a human being?
2. What is our calling as human beings?

Only after we have answered these two questions can we answer the question of health and wholeness.

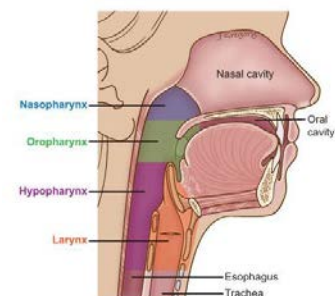
The Biblical model of a human being

What is the Bible's model of a human being? You and I like to think of ourselves in rather lofty, noble—and even pious—terms. We, especially men, describe ourselves as being on the top of the animal pyramid. We tell ourselves that we are the most intelligent creatures on earth. We have lofty references about human mental superiority, reason, creativity, and freedom. We are in the image of God. Where has this lofty and pious view of ourselves got us?

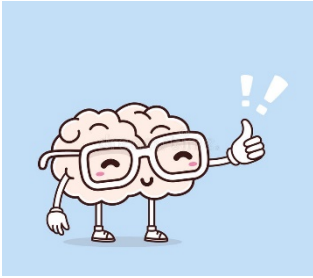
- Adam and Eve wanted to be "like God", and so they overstepped their limitations as creatures.
- The builders at the Tower of Babel said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves..."
- Today, we need look only at all the human conflict, the hate and fear, or the ecological crisis to see how human beings have overstepped our limitations as creatures. Human history is one of constantly being tempted to define ourselves in terms of greatness, placing ourselves as high as possible in the universe, wishing to be like God, or even to dethrone God and enthrone themselves.

While the Bible doesn't deny that we are created in God's image, it usually describes us in more down-to-earth terms. In our passage in Genesis there are three fascinating words to describe who we are.

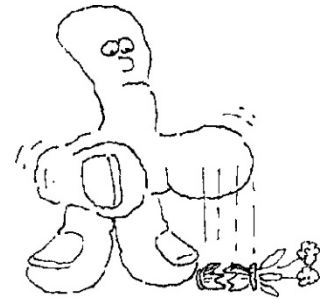
- The first word is **Adam**. We usually think of Adam as a name of the first person, but in Hebrew it can also mean earthling. Adam is closely related to earth, soil, and ground. God says just as much in Genesis, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return"(Genesis 2:7).
- Adam the earthling is also a "living being"(Hebrew word is **nephesh**). The basic meaning of "living



being” in Hebrew, however, is throat or neck. Humankind is a living throat, neck. That idiom may sound strange to our ears, but teachers of English know that we often use body parts to describe people. She's a brain.



He's all thumbs. In a similar way, the OT calls humanity a throat or a neck.



When we say that she's a brain, we mean that she is smart. When we say, he's all thumbs, we mean he's clumsy. In a similar way, when the OT says that humanity is a throat or a neck it is describing the part of the body that represents the passage for breath and food. When we have breath and food, we have a certain wholeness; without them, we are no more.

- Humans are not only described as earthlings and as needy but are also described as **flesh**. Flesh that can be torn. Flesh becomes wrinkled and old, and returns to dust. Flesh also describes human weakness rather well, doesn't it?

Before we even talk about health and wholeness, we first needed to ask how the Bible understands us humans. And the picture is fairly humbling. **Humans are earthly or lowly, needy, and weak.**

How do we understand health and wholeness within this view of being human? Quite easily. When we see ourselves, and others, as lowly, needy, and weak, then this is the first step toward health and wholeness.

In answer to the question "Who is my neighbour?", Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan. That Samaritan knew the man by the roadside, not because he knew his background, or had seen him as someone who had a lot of potential, but because he saw him as needy and vulnerable.

On another occasion, when the disciples tried to understand human nature and human sickness, they asked Jesus, "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" And again, Jesus' response showed that he understood the man not in terms of greatness, his background, not even in terms of sin, but in terms of need. Humankind is earthly, needy, and weak. Knowing this made Jesus a healer, not only in this case but throughout his ministry.



How easy is it for us to admit that we are lowly, needy, and weak? About 15 years ago, I went wall climbing with my 3 children. Actually, they were doing the climbing and I was watching them scamper up the wall. It looked so easy and effortless, so when I was asked if I wanted to climb too, I said, yes! I put on my helmet and harness and began my ascent

up the wall. By the time I got $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up my arms were aching and tired and I couldn't keep going. I let go of the knobs on the wall and hung there for a while, resting, and tried again. I couldn't make it to the top.

At that very moment I was very aware of my humanness; I was getting older and weaker and my children were younger and getting stronger. A humbling moment.

Perhaps this is a male thing, but too many middle-aged men think they are able to play a game of hockey or football just the way they did when they were a teenager. They head out on the weekend, and then take the next few days off from work because of a broken arm, sprained an ankle, or pulled a muscle.



It's hard to admit that we are lowly, needy, and weak. I knew a person who got cancer. He refused to admit it, and even while he was dying in the hospital, refused to accept his frailty. Many older adults want to do things for themselves—be independent. Can you remember a time when you had to admit that you couldn't do something anymore? How did that feel? People at 40 sometimes have mid-life crises. Why? Much of it has to do with the sudden realization they won't be on this earth forever. Lowly, needy, and weak.

What image of health and wholeness we shall work towards? The answer must be a very humble one.

- We take the step toward wholeness when we help our brother or sister abandon the human striving to be great, to be “like God.”
- We take the step toward wholeness when we help others accept the God-willed limitations of being human.

- We take the step toward wholeness when we help others meet the everyday requirements of staying alive.

These three things. This is the goal towards which we work to make people whole.

Our Human Calling

The Bible considers humans to be lowly, needy, and weak. So, what about our calling? Aren't we, after all, created in God's image? Doesn't this mean that our status in the world is higher, greater, and better than the rest of creation?

According to the Bible, what lifts humans above the rest of creation is not a higher quality or lordship, but a higher calling and responsibility. That a lowly, needy, and weak creature such as ourselves can be called out by God to do something special for God, is God's grace to us.

I think it's always good to be reminded of the model humans, the biblical "heroes", whom God chose to carry out special tasks. The list is not overly impressive.

- Remember **Jacob**, holy Jacob, who cheated his brother Esau
- **Joseph**, that spoiled and haughty dreamer
- **Moses**, the too scared to speak in public Egyptian educated escaped murderer
- **King David**, the lustful adulterer
- **Jeremiah**, the too young to be a prophet
- **Peter**, rough and tough Peter who denied his master
- **Mary**, a third-class citizen who was the first witness to the resurrection
- **Paul**, the persecutor of Christians, afflicted with a thorn in his flesh.



These are just some of the examples which make it clear that human greatness in the Bible is not a matter of great and powerful heroes doing great and heroic things. No. There are **no heroes** in the Bible, but only **anti-heroes**. It's not that great people do great things in the Bible; rather it is lowly, needy, and weak people who are empowered by God to do great things. The gifts of the Spirit that Paul speaks about in 1 Corinthians are gifts of God's grace. They are not natural endowments, things that we are good at. Rather the gifts of the Spirit are things Christians do despite our lowly status.

What does this kind of human calling have to do with health and wholeness? Plenty. We need to remind ourselves that the first step towards health and wholeness comes when basic limitations are accepted, and basic needs are met. In fact, wholeness is no more than that. The Bible's ideals for human existence under God are surprisingly low.

For instance, in the Book of Micah it says, *“The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

A simple everyday life, with its basic daily needs met, and with grateful subordination to God's will, are all the Bible requires for human wholeness.

Such a lowly form of existence is not what we are taught by our society. Our culture tells us to use our abilities, power, reason, and talents to reach the top. The top could be happiness, success, wealth, power, fame, or whatever we see as the good life. Rising to the top is important, because when one gets to the top, then you are whole.

I went to school with a guy who had been in a farm accident where he lost a leg. He wore a prosthetic leg and walked with a limp. At the time of the accident his **spirit**, his life-breath, could have been snuffed out by bleeding to death; his **flesh** was torn. To be a healer towards this person meant sewing up his wounds and nursing him to a level of physical well-being where his basic needs were met.

If something like that happened to me, I would have been devastated. I imagine I would have been very angry and bitter. But how do you heal a person who is bitter and angry?



When I lived overseas, I had a colleague who suffered from depression. She would have really good days, but then all of a sudden had days when she had feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and helplessness. I tried to make sure she took her prescribed medication and made counselling with a mental health professional available.

Our culture tells us that we have to use our own strength and natural endowments to scratch and claw our way to the top, and when physical or mental illness get in the way, we too often express pity and sadness that these people can no longer climb to greatness, fame, riches, or whatever is defined as “the top”.

As Christians, we aim for a different goal. Rather than showing pity or expressing grief with those who have a physical disability or struggle with mental health, the Christian calling is to help others see their potential for greatness and wholeness hasn't changed at all in God's economy. We are all, in different ways, broken people. Our value, our usefulness as an instrument in God's plan is not dependent on our strength, abilities, natural endowments. Humans wholeness is rooted in God's grace.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Accepting who we are as God's beautiful creation, no matter if we have a prosthetic leg, can't hear or see, or suffer from mental illness, is the way toward being whole. A person who has a "thorn in his flesh" can be healthy and whole.

A Biblical view of Wholeness:

1. Human wholeness is when we abandon our human striving to be great, to be "like God.
2. Human wholeness is when we accept the God-willed limitations of being human.
3. Human wholeness is when we have the everyday requirements of staying alive.

Our lives belong to God no matter what condition are bodies are in. God isn't finished with us yet. Amen