

It is good to be back with my friends. I was in Canada last week, spending time with Lutherans. **My reputation has declined so much, I'm now having to leave the country to find people willing to hear what I have to say.** Canada is closer than I realized. You can board a plane in Indianapolis and be in Toronto faster than you can drive to Bedford. **But they don't know much about Quakers up there.** When I went through customs, the man asked why I was visiting Canada.

"To attend a religious conference," I told him.

He asked me what religion I was.

"Quaker," I told him.

"Never heard of them," he said.

"We're evangelically modest," I told him. "But have you ever heard of William Penn?"

No, he hadn't.

"Richard Nixon. Perhaps you've heard of him."

"No."

"How about Quaker Oats?" I asked. "The guy on the oatmeal box with the funny hat. That's us."

No, he apparently ate bacon and eggs for breakfast.

Then he said, "Never heard about the Quakers, but you look harmless enough." And he let me in.

If you're ever in need of self-understanding, just go through a customs line and they'll tell you who you are. I am unknown and harmless.

We're continuing our Theology 101 series today. We've talked about the nature of God, and the nature of Jesus. **Today, I want to talk about our nature, about who we are and what it means to be human.** This past week, I overheard two interesting comments about human nature, each representing a different view of what it means to be human.

I heard the first comment at Krogers. A man and woman, presumably husband and wife, were shopping. **The wife had sent her husband in search of something and he had brought back the wrong item.** We men do this so our wives won't ask us to go to the store. So he had brought back the wrong item, and she said, "Can't you do anything right?" **He said, "Hey, don't blame me. I'm only human."** We've all heard that saying before. Perhaps we've even said it ourselves. But what are we really saying? **Aren't we really saying, "I am incompetent. I don't know what I'm doing. You can't depend on me."** I know lots of people who have this self-understanding, who think themselves flawed, prone to error, and utterly undependable. **They think that is what it means to be human.** Before anything else. To be a failure.

The second comment I heard about human nature happened last Sunday, when I was with the Lutherans. **It was All Saints Sunday.** The pastor had invited the children to come forward, had asked them what saints were, and a little girl said, “A saint is someone who is especially special, who God loves especially lot.” **It wasn’t grammatically correct, but we knew what she meant and it was very touching.** Then the minister told the children that coincidentally, there just happened to be a saint with them in church that very morning, an honest-to-goodness saint she wanted them to meet. **The reaction of the people was very interesting.** The kids stood up and began looking out in the congregation trying to find the saint, and the adults began looking at one another, wondering if the saint was seated next to them. And this is how egotistical I am, I thought she was talking about me. **But then from out of the folds of her robe, she pulled a mirror, which she held before every child.** “There’s the saint,” she said. The kids grinned really big.

But one little boy wouldn’t look in the mirror. **Couldn’t get him to look in the mirror.** I was seated near him and heard him say, very softly, “I’m not a saint.” He’d heard the definition of a saint— someone who is especially special, who God loves especially lot. And something in him said, “That’s not me.” **Broke my heart.**

What do you see when you look in a mirror?

When I first became a pastor, I was told by a man in the meeting that it would be my job to get people saved. **I was working with the young people.** “You have to let these kids know they are sinners in need of salvation,” he said. “You’ve got to make sure they know that.” Those kids would come to me with their problems, and they seemed so weighed down. I tell you, being a teenager can be so hard. Remember those years? **You feel as if you’re always under judgment, that you’re always being scrutinized.** So they’d come and talk to me. I could never bring myself to tell those young people they were sinners. **I could never hold up that mirror to them and tell them they were looking at a sinner.** I was there two years, and when I left I was so discouraged, because I’d let that men define my calling and I thought I had failed at it.

Went to another church. Fired from there after a few weeks. **There were fruit flies that lasted longer in that church than I did.**

Went to pastor another church. Same story. **They wanted me to tell them they were sinners.** I wanted to tell them they were saints, that they were a royal priesthood, a chosen race, a holy nation, God’s own people, a little less than angels. **But apparently it was too wonderful to believe, so they never did.** I could go back to that church today, tell them they were rotten sinners, and they’d say *Amen*.

I continue to be amazed at the number of people willing to believe the worst about themselves. But I could just never hold up that sinner mirror in front of someone. **Because I really believe, I truly do believe, that people become what you tell them they are.**

What do you see when you look in a mirror? Sinner or saint? A disappointment to God or a beloved child of God?

Not only do people look in mirrors, sometimes an entire nation does.

America looked in the mirror this past Tuesday, and saw a new image of ourselves. I was moved not only by the historical significance of Barack Obama's election as our President, I was deeply grateful for the concession speech of John McCain, when he recalled that "a century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House was taken as an outrage in many quarters." **Then Senator McCain held up a mirror and helped us see ourselves in a new light when he said, "America today is a world away from the cruel and frightful bigotry of that time."**

We become who people tell us we are.

That is a double-edged sword, a curse and a blessing.

If we are told we are sinners, that story of failure and falling short might likely become the overarching theme of our lives.

That is the curse.

But if we are fortunate, and someone says to us, “Would you like to see a saint? Would you like to see a loving person, full of God’s light and life, someone whom God will use to accomplish much good?” then holds up a mirror to us, and bids us to look into it, we might likely become all those things and more.

That is the blessing.