When Gorillas Make Bigger News Than People

The image of God in man is what makes human beings uniquely precious at all stages of their lives, from embryo to old person, from brilliant to suffering from dementia.

by Donna Harrison
As Lutherans who share a belief about the inherent personhood of every human being, we need to be able to speak fearlessly about what makes human beings worth caring for: the image of God in man.

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May 28, 2016: 17-year-old male shot dead by authorities after observing attempts to kill a 3-year-old.

This could be the headline in too many cities across the country. But there are two surprises in this story. The first surprise is that the 17-year-old male was a gorilla and the 3-year-old a human. The second surprise is that many people across the U.S. condemned taking the life of the gorilla, despite his aggression toward the 3-year-old human boy. They argued that animals are people too and should be given the same value and protection as a human. This attitude should be no surprise in a world without moral consensus. If we can’t agree that human beings have more value than animals, why should we agree that our society would protect our most vulnerable persons, the elderly and the unborn, from abuse and destruction?

We all agree that we should protect other people as we want to be protected ourselves. That is the Golden Rule. But who and what do we include as “other persons” and why? There are three general answers to this question.

**ANSWER 1**

“Persons” are those entities we value and have a relationship with, those whom we love and with whom we can interact. So if we love and interact with our pet gorilla, then that gorilla is more of a person to us than those we don’t love or with whom don’t interact. The danger with this emphasis on “interpersonal theories of personhood” is that human beings who can’t interact with me (or “society” or “the State”) become less valuable. Hidden people, like the unborn, the handicapped, the demented, the foreigner would naturally become less of a “person” to us than our pet. And the source of the “person’s” value is, well, me, the society, the State. So, what if your society or the State doesn’t want you around anymore?

**ANSWER 2**

“Persons” are those who have certain characteristics. This is the attitude of most utilitarian philosophers and the attitude of secular Americans. The chief characteristic most often cited is “thinking” (“sentience”). (It has always been interesting to me that those who consider themselves to be among the most intelligent are the ones who most often put forth this criteria, which seems a bit self-serving and more than a little biased in my opinion.)

The obvious problem with using “thinking” as a criteria for personhood is how much “thinking” you have to be capable of before you are valued as a “person.” The unborn don’t think much. The mentally ill don’t think logically. Do little kids have enough “sentience” to be persons? What happens to our “personhood” when we undergo anesthesia or even go to sleep and lose all capacity to think? Is it okay to take our life then, since we are not “sentient” and therefore are not at that moment a “person” any longer?

**ANSWER 3**

This theory holds that all human beings are “persons.” Why? Because human beings are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 notes, “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” See also Gen. 5:1: “When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God.” And also Gen. 9:6: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” This inherent-transcendent theory of human personhood is shared by major religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and some sects of Hinduism.

As Lutherans who share a belief about the inherent personhood of every human being, we need to be able to speak fearlessly about what makes human beings worth caring for: the image of God in man. And this image of God in man is what makes human beings uniquely precious at all stages of their life, from embryo to old person, from brilliant to suffering from dementia. That is what separates a 3-year-old boy, who bears the image of God, from a 17-year-old gorilla, who doesn’t.

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