



**"Human, Just Like Us"**  
**Scripture – Genesis 2:18-24**  
**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, October 3, 2021**

I will never forget the words my host sister spoke as we walked through the neighborhood. It was an ordinary December day, three months after I'd arrived in India. The town in which I was living was about an hour outside the closest big city, which meant I was some distance from any tourist site a foreigner might visit. Needless to say, it was unusual to see a white woman walking around this particular neighborhood. What was *not* surprising was the community's response: people stared ... openly, and often at length. In southwestern India this reaction is *not* considered rude. And, while I found it uncomfortable, I was growing accustomed to people's stares.

On this particular afternoon, my host sister took notice. As we walked along the road, Afrah — who was eight and fully-possessed of the candor of children — matter-of-factly observed: "People are staring at you."

"I know," I responded. "It happens a lot. I'm getting used to it."

At which point Afrah looked up at me and said, "It's OK. You're human, just like us."

*You're human, just like us.* I doubt Afrah has any awareness of the gift she gave me that day. Until that moment I hadn't even realized it was an affirmation I needed to hear. But, to an outsider yearning for the embrace of community, her words were a gift of grace. I was not so different after all. In Afrah's eyes, I was just like everyone else in the neighborhood.

Bone of bone and flesh of flesh, some might say.

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"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh ..." So exclaims the first man at the culmination of this story, the *second* creation story recorded in the book of Genesis. The first account of creation is likely more familiar to you. That is the one in which God labored for six days, calling forth light and plants and land animals and — finally — human beings in the divine image. And, after each and every act, the Creator surveyed creation and pronounced it "good."

The creation account before us today directly follows the first, but it is very different in both sequence and style. God molds the first human from the dust of the earth, breathes into this being the breath of life, and places the creature in Eden to till and keep the garden. And, then the Creator surveys creation. But *unlike* in the first story,

which repeats the refrain “God saw that it was good,” God now sees that it is *not* good. “It is *not* good that the human should be alone,” the Creator says.

So God begins to experiment. Once again, the Creator reaches into the dust of the earth, this time with the intention of molding a partner for the solitary human. God forms flamingos and kangaroos and hippopotami, but none of them are quite right. None of these creatures resolve the problem at hand — what one scholar calls “the deficit of community.”<sup>1</sup>

So God tries again. The Creator causes a deep sleep to fall upon the human and performs surgery, building a second person from the so-called “rib” of the first.

God brings the two together, and the first human pronounces God’s new creation good: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” The problem is resolved. The Creator has created a fitting partner for the solitary creature. No longer alone, the first human finds community in the embrace of the second, who is one and the same — bone of bone and flesh of flesh.

Though they are far from scientific accounts of the origins of the world, the stories we find in Genesis 1 and 2 lift up profound truths about creation. These accounts speak to the truth of who God is and who we are. And going one step further, the second creation story tells the truth of our need for community. God determines that it is not good for humans to be alone.

Unfortunately, this aspect of the truth has been obscured due to the ways this text has been used — or, rather, *misused* — over the centuries. For much of its history, the church has pointed to the second creation story to teach an ideal of family life that is not, actually, ideal for many. Nor is that interpretation faithful to the text.

When we read this story in English, we are missing the nuance of the original Hebrew. So much has been lost in translation:

For instance, when God announces “I will make a *helper*” we might expect that the second human will be subservient to the first. After all, in our context, a *helper* is there to assist, to fetch, to serve. Never-mind that the Hebrew word rendered “helper” is most commonly used of God — the Creator of heaven and earth, the one who offers help to humans in need.

There is also the issue of the “rib.” The noun that is translated “rib” in Genesis 2 is elsewhere translated “side,” as in the north *side* of the temple. This one little word has an enormous impact when we imagine the surgery God performs. After all, it is very different to remove a single rib than to cut a human being in two.

Most significant of all is the way English translations blur the distinction between the Hebrew words for “human” and “man.” Throughout the story the author uses *adam*, a term that simply means “human.” God forms a human (*adam*) from the dust of the earth; God says, “It is not good that the human (*adam*) should be alone; God causes a deep sleep to fall upon the human (*adam*). It is not until God divides the human in two that gender is introduced to the story. Only then, when God brings the beings together, does the author use the noun indicating a *male* human. “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (*ishah*) for out of Man (*ish*) this one was taken.” *Ish* and *Ishah*. Rather than highlighting their difference, the words for the man and woman underscore their similarity. They are partners befitting each other — bone of bone and flesh of flesh.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Olson, “Commentary on Genesis 2:18-24” (2009), [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

There is a lot I could unpack here — far more than one sermon can handle. But let me sum it up this way: Historically, the church has misused this text to promote a narrow image of the nuclear family — one headed by a male who is married to a female helpmate. This reading has done immeasurable harm — not only to those who are married, but also to those who are single; not only to women, but also to those who are LGBTQ. But this text is *not* intended to prescribe the 'perfect' family. Rather, it is a story about the *whole human family*. It is a story about our need for companionship, for connection, for community, in whatever form that takes.

"It is not good that the human should be alone," God observes. So God sets out to rectify this situation — to create for the lonely human a fitting companion, another person with whom to share life's sorrow and joy. And the story that unfolds reveals a profound truth about who we are: we flourish within the embrace of community — in life shared with those who are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, who are human just like us.

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As it happens, the ties that bind us are fragile. We see throughout the book of Genesis how easily they stretch, even snap. Immediately following the second account of creation, the bond between the first humans is strained. You know the story: In an act of disobedience, the two eat from the tree in the center of the garden — the *only* tree the Creator has said is off-limits. When God confronts the pair, the man points at his partner and says, "It was the woman! *She* made me do it!" And, just like that, the first human community fractures. No longer united the man and woman stand before their Creator, separated from God and one another by sin and shame. Already (already!) they have forgotten that they are bone of bone and flesh of flesh.

It seems we, too, are prone to forgetfulness. In times of stress, we also forget that we are bone of bone and flesh of flesh. So in our sinfulness or shame, in our fear or anger, we separate ourselves from one another — denying our created identity, denying our need for companionship, for connection, for community.

This tendency to forget who we are affects every human relationship — from our most intimate bonds to the ties that bind us together as a global community. We see the evidence every day: in private disagreements that — when handled poorly — strain the relationships we cherish most, in public disputes that reveal fractures within the wider human family. Every time I see examples of our division plastered across the news —

reports of women gone missing,  
accounts of yet another shooting,  
the disturbing images of border agents chasing migrants through the desert —

I wonder: When will we truly believe that we are bone of bone and flesh of flesh?

There is another way. It begins with remembering who we are. And then, having remembered that humankind flourishes within the embrace of community, we are moved to act — to proclaim, through word and deed: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!"

Let me offer you another image I saw recently. Like the photos of Haitian migrants, this one was also taken at our southern border. But instead of depicting the division that plagues our human family, this one celebrated community.

The photo was taken at Friendship Park in San Diego, California. Along one edge of this park stretches a tall metal fence marking the border with Mexico. But the fence is not solid; there are small holes — the size of a finger-tip — that allow visitors to peer through the fence and see who or what is on the other side. On the day this photo was taken, there were clusters of people on both sides of the wall — some in the United States, some in Mexico. They had gathered to celebrate communion. And, as they broke bread and shared the cup, as they passed the peace by pressing their palms against the fence, they proclaimed to one another and to the world: We are bone of bone and flesh of flesh.

Every time we gather around the table of our Lord, we also proclaim this truth. For at this table — where bread is broken and wine poured out — the fractured family is made whole. At this table — where people of every land and race gather together — divisions cease, unity is found. At this table — where there is room for everyone and plenty for all — we find companionship, connection, community. For the same God who said, “It is *not* good that the human should be alone,” provides a place where we may be restored as one. And — as Christ bids us “come” — we discover once again that we flourish within the embrace of community — in life shared with those who are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, who are human just like us.

### **Prayers of the People – Gregory Knox Jones**

Architect of the Universe, the One who breathes life into all that exists, you did not create us to live alone, but rather to live in relationship – with you, with others, and, with all living things on this beautiful blue planet we call home. Through the scriptures – especially in the teachings of Jesus – we have discovered that the way to live in relationship is to be respectful of others and to treat them with dignity, no matter the differences between us. Indeed, our differences are not meant to separate and divide us from one another, but to add interest, energy, and excitement.

Gracious God, when we ignore your image in others, remove our cataracts and sharpen our vision so that we can awake to the glimmer of beauty that flickers within each person. Inspire us to exude only what is *true*, only what is *loving*, only what is *generous* and only what is *just* because even if we do not persuade a change in others, we can be confident that we are being faithful to you.

As we prepare to break bread with one another, remembering the kindness and humility Jesus showed his disciples at their last supper, we are especially mindful of those in distant lands who also celebrate this sacrament today. Although we are various colors and speak countless languages, we share a profound spiritual bond. Each of us in our own way seeks to fulfill our commitment to you by loving as Jesus loved. We are grateful for all people of the planet who overcome darkness with light, who pry open the floodgates of justice, and who are driven by your vision of a day when we will be able to pound assault weapons into farming tools.

Lord, let us remember refugees who have no place to call home;  
those in prison who are forgotten behind bars,  
and people in hospitals and health care centers praying for miracles.

Everlasting God, as we share the bread and cup with one another, remind us that we are one human family, and that you call us to strive for the values that generate opportunities for all people and all living things of the earth to thrive, and to aim for the ideals that enhance the common good.

As we prepare to pray the prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray, may we be mindful of the ways you spark new hopes in our hearts.

Now we pray as one, saying,

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.**