

Story and Meditation: What are Human Beings?

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Trinity Sunday

Psalm 8, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

by Eric Anderson

When malu fish are young, they gather together in schools. Not very big schools, but schools to learn about what it is to be a malu. They swim together, they rest together, they hunt together, they eat together. When they get larger and older, they set off on their own. They're a little bit like people in that way. They, well, they graduate from school.

This is a story about a couple of malu schools that decided not to graduate.

Both schools formed along the same reef just offshore. Both schools, to begin with, were completely usual. They swam. They looked for worms and crabs and snails. They ate worms and crabs and snails when they found them. They rested.

Unusually, the malu of one school started to deeply dislike the malu of the other school. When they saw the other fish nearby, they'd bare their teeth and bristle their fins. If one school found some crabs for lunch, the other school would try to drive them away and take them for lunch. When that happened, the other school would wait until later and drive their rivals away from their dinner.

Ordinarily, all this would have ended when the malu matured and the schools broke up. These fish, however, never graduated. They stayed together. They continued to challenge and fight one another. They all became rather thin and hungry-looking, because when fish fight over food the food tends to escape or get ruined. Every one of the malu came to have scales missing from their battles.

I'd like to tell you that they finally grew up, that their schools that had become gangs broke up, and they came to live a life that satisfied them better in body and in soul. As far as I know, however, they have not. Other malu watch them in amazement. "Imagine that," they say. "Those malu are acting like... people."

Truly, if you look at human beings from a fish's perspective, those malu were acting very much like people. Unlike the adult malu, we continue to be a schooling species, even if we do claim something called graduation. We form groups not at the drop of a hat, but without dropping a hat. We have families and clans. We have villages and counties. We have states and nations and international alliances. We have activity clubs and civic clubs. We have professional

organizations. Referring not to the buildings but the communities: we have synagogues and temples and mosques and churches.

We have formed other groups as well, sometimes by defining them for others rather than ourselves. We have racial groups. We have interest groups. We have rich people. We have poor people. We have Them. We have Us.

Forming groups doesn't necessarily mean that the groups have to conflict or even compete. Neighbors can share with one another, after all. Remember Fred Rogers cooling his feet in a wading pool with Francois Clemmons, a black man playing a police officer in 1969. Sara Kettler writes at biography.com, "When Clemmons sat down and placed his feet in the water, right next to Rogers', the two men broke a well-known color barrier."

That example rises, however, because groups have and do define one another as Different, as Other, as Not Us. Worst of all, we come to define people as things. British humorist Terry Pratchett said it so clearly through his character Granny Weatherwax in *Carpe Jugulum*: "And sin, young man, is when you treat people as things. Including yourself. That's what sin is."

When you treat people as things, including yourself, that's what sin is.

We are very good at treating people as things.

Aren't we?

Overt racial supremacy is the most explicit manifestation of it, from the 19th century American doctrine of Manifest Destiny to Chief Justice Roger Taney's appalling pronouncement in the Dred Scott decision, "[African Americans] had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it." Overt racial supremacy is evident in the Bayonet Constitution of 1884, which gave the vote to resident aliens (not just naturalized citizens) while excluding Hawaiians who could not meet literacy or wealth thresholds, and completely banning Asians from the polls.

We like to think of overt racial supremacy as having ended when Fred Rogers shared his pool with Francois Clemmons, but neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan marched in Charlottesville. The Proud Boys are standing, heavily armed, on the margins of protest today. Racists calling themselves "boogaloo bois" are wearing, of all things, aloha shirts beneath their rifles and ammunition belts.

Overt racial supremacy formed our customs and our laws, friends. The Civil Rights Acts and the Voting Rights Acts of the 60s were significant changes but they did not address thousands of

legal and social structures built on racism. Neighborhoods in many American towns and cities are generally dominated by a single racial or ethnic group – whites here, blacks here, Hispanics here, Chinese here. We are left with a legacy of structural and cultural racism that those not disadvantaged by it may not see, but those who suffer from it always do.

How else do we treat people as things? When we stop thinking of them as people, and start to think of them as a problem to be solved. That's what we've seen over and over in this last week. There's people sitting on their porch after curfew. They're a problem. Shoot them with paintballs. There's a man standing straight as the crowd retreats. That's a problem. Push him down. There's a crowd of protesters between the White House and St. John's Church. That's a problem. Choke them with tear gas, shoot them with rubber bullets, hit them with clubs and shields.

People as things.

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, O God?

To God, we are not things.

Nancy DeClaisse-Walford notes something interesting about Psalm 8. The word *mashal* is the one we translate as "dominion," but it has another meaning. She writes at Working Preacher: "It also means 'proverb' or 'wise saying.' And thus, we might translate verse 6 of Psalm 8, as 'you have made us wise over the works of your hands.' Wisdom IS power; but wise power does not exploit, does not 'use up and throw away.' Rather, wise power is mindful of and cares for, just as Psalm 8:4 describes God as being mindful of and caring for human beings."

To God, we are not things. People must not be things to us. People must not be "those inferiors" who belong to another race or clan or nation. They must not be problems. They must not be things.

They must be people.

George Floyd died because, at some point, Derek Chauvin and those around him stopped seeing him as a person, and continued to see him that way for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. So many other African-American people have not been seen as people by the people who killed them, by the prosecutors and grand juries who found no criminal behavior in their deaths, and by the judges and juries who acquitted their killers.

Black lives matter. If black lives do not matter, then it is not true that all lives matter. But black lives do matter. They matter to God. They matter to God who is mindful of human beings. They matter to God who cares for human beings. I am sure that mindfulness and care sometimes alternates between tears and rage, but God stays with us.

Why can't we?

Amen.