"Remaining Human"
Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 13:45-46
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> Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.
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> For the Word of God in scripture,
> For the Word of God within us,
> For the Word of God among us,
> **Thanks be to God.**

A few weeks ago, BaptistNews.com wrote about some companies who are offering new AI technologies to churches. Here's how they describe the services of a company called "ChurchAI":

> Their AI tracks what everyone does once they arrive on campus. Then it records each person's behavior in order to establish their normal patterns. According to their website, each person gets an "Engagement Score" that gets tracked in the church's database. Then when the church member breaks their pattern, their engagement score goes down. If it lowers enough, their profile gets flagged as crossing the "risk threshold" and church leadership is notified.
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> But because the system is automated by AI, the church member gets contacted by AI.

If you don't keep up on church technology you might not have realized that many megachurches switched to facial recognition software to track attendance in the last couple of years. These new technologies obviously take that development to the next level. Fortunately, the article was calling out the authoritarian nature of this technology, which also fits with the theology of certain American churches.

This week I read about a conference of the Catholic church recently held in Rome to explore the ways that AI chatbots have "created new pathways for spiritual confusion, isolation, and demonic influence." Apparently there are now "technomancers," who use AI to perform divination, and some Catholics are worried about demonic powers using the technology to possess people in new ways.

At least once a week now, there is a new revelation of what some AI agent has done, either solving a difficult math problem or going rouge and hacking into government programs. I've been listening to a lot of podcast interviews lately, exploring the current state of the technology and its ramifications for politics, education, ethics, philosophy, or even the continuation of the human species. We are living in a weird and wild time.

Recently Shaw University Divinity School announced a new degree—a doctor of education in artificial intelligence and moral agency. Becoming the first theological school to offer a degree program in artificial intelligence.

Clearly, we need theological resources to help us think well and faithfully. So I've been grateful for the encyclical that Pope Leo released earlier this year, *Magnificent Humanity: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Age of Artificial Intelligence.*

Last week I introduced this letter and its basic framing—that humanity faces a choice of building technologies together for the common good or constructing a new tower of Babel.

But what makes Leo's document so compelling is its central point—"Ours is the pressing duty to remain profoundly human."

In our digital, technocratic age, remaining human becomes one of our most vital ethical and spiritual tasks.

Leo cautions how the currently dominant worldview threatens our very humanity. He proclaims:

> The risk extends beyond the misuse of certain technologies. More gravely, the pervasive technocratic paradigm in which we are immersed, and that is amplified by the digital revolution and AI, threatens to normalize an anti-human vision. In that vision, the fullness of life is equated with having more, reducing weakness, eliminating uncertainty and exerting total control. When efficiency becomes the ultimate measure of value, human beings are tempted to see themselves as a project to be optimized rather than as persons called to relationship and communion.

One can see in there a warning not only about digital technologies, but much about our current wellness and self-improvement cultures, that view human life as a "project to be optimized." He's deeply concerned about the ways in which our current paradigm views all human weakness or limitation as something to be eliminated. A striving for a form of transhuman perfectionism. He writes that "an outlook that devalues human limits and promises a purely technical form of 'salvation'" will itself limit "the heart and the grandeur of the human person."

He elaborates:

> Our relationship with life seems to be in crisis today. Everything that appears as a 'limit'—incapacity, illness, old age, suffering, vulnerability—tends to be seen primarily as a defect to be corrected, rather than a reality through which our humanity matures and opens itself to relationship. And yet we must remember that humanity flourishes not despite limitations, but often through them. . . . While it is right to strive to alleviate the suffering that marks human life, it is also wise to acknowledge our fundamental finitude. . . .
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> It is precisely within our limitations that the following find a place: compassion, as well as a sincere concern for the needs of others; a generosity that can emerge even in the midst of darkness and failure; spiritual experience and the worship of God. . . . Mysteriously, it is precisely in such moments [of limitation] that we can discover a new wisdom, tangibly experience the closeness of others and encounter the presence of the Lord.

"Finitude," he writes, "when truly accepted, does not diminish us but opens us to recognizing the face of God and others."

Here's the fundamental disagreement between our faith tradition and the technocratic paradigm. Finitude and limitations are essential parts of our humanity and of our relationships with God and one another.

Hear these further wise words of Pope Leo:

> To eliminate suffering entirely would mean, in the end, extinguishing love and desire as well. Those who love and desire cannot avoid passing through trial and suffering; and over the years, we carry within us lessons that leave their mark like scars, the memories of a journey shaped by freedom and failure, dreams and disappointments. It is only thanks to the interplay of these elements that the wonders of the soul occur within us, allowing us to sense the richness of our humanity. To renounce this adventure, both tragic and splendid, in the name of a presumed transcendence of all limits . . . would no longer be human.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like a merchant seeking fine pearls who finds the best and sells everything to buy it. The kingdom of God is like someone who gives everything for the thing of great value that they deeply desire.

In his commentary on the passage, Mark Allan Powell writes that stories of Jesus such as this one teach us that the kingdom of God "refers not only to a future life beyond death but also to the experience of God's influence and power here and now." And what, in particular, he thinks we learn from this very short parable is that "Jesus indicates that living in accord with God's will is not burdensome." He adds, "Finding the life that God intends one to live is like discovering a prize of inestimable worth. Life under God's righteous rule is to be sought above anything else."

Tom Long, in his commentary, develops a similar idea—"the experience of the kingdom is like finding something valuable that revolutionizes a person's basic values and opens the possibility of a life of action and response."

Both emphasize that finding the kingdom of God is like embracing the life of great value, the life we most deeply desire.

Which to me resonates with two of the most important sayings in the Christian tradition. One, the central tenet of our Reformed tradition—that the chief end of our humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. And the other from the church father Irenaeus, that the glory of God is a humanity fully alive.

Today, in face of our current technological and existential crises, I want to see the pearl of great price as our own humanity. The thing of greatest value, which we should give up everything else for, is our own humanity—in all of its glory and vulnerability. Meaning that to be part of the kingdom of God, right now, is to seek to remain profoundly human.

Pope Leo reminds us that the "value of persons . . . does not depend on what they achieve or produce," that we all have an inherent dignity as the children of God.

The kind of development and growth that respects that dignity is one that views the whole human person. He writes, "The quality of development is measured by the ability to integrate justice toward people and the care of our common home, and to promote dignified living conditions, access to necessary goods, just social relations, care of creation and consideration for future generations." All economic and technological growth should be viewed through those lenses.

Most fundamentally, he writes that "the quality of a civilization is measured not by the power of its means, but by the care it is able to offer." He elaborates:

> The ability to care for one another is a fundamental dimension of our humanity, one that is learned and mastered through lived experience. Reading stories to a child, offering company to an elderly person and arranging a home so that it is welcoming are simple gestures often rooted in family life. They teach us to value care at a societal level and train us to recognize others as persons worthy of attention.

How we remain profoundly human, then, isn't some difficult task. It's as simple as reading a story to a child or driving an elderly friend to a doctor's appointment. These are things we know how to do. Especially in the church, where we have prioritized cultivating communities of care and belonging.

This is how Pope Leo summarizes the spiritual task before us—"True progress always stems from a heart open to others, an intelligence willing to listen and a will that seeks what unites rather than what separates."

To remain profoundly human we must open our hearts, learn with attentive curiosity, and seek to unite rather than to divide.

I believe we can meet that challenge.

So, no matter how weird and wild the news gets in the coming months about artificial intelligence, set yourself the assignment to remain profoundly human.

Consider what you know to be the most important things that contribute to a life well-lived, and do them. We humans, too often, get sidetracked into worrying about things that do not contribute to own health and well-being. While we cannot overlook our limitations or the pains and sufferings of others in this world, we can allow ourselves to focus on what we know brings goodness, beauty, and joy to the world.

Therefore,

Take a walk in the autumn woods.

Play some of your favorite music on the stereo and dance.

Get together with friends.

Laugh, a lot.

Find opportunities to be silly and playful.

Move your bodies.

Create. Whatever creative outlet feeds your soul, do it, often.

Spend time caring for children.

Reach out in compassion to someone you know is hurting. Maybe take them a hot dish.

Sit quietly outside and attend to what nature is doing around you.

Take a moment to thank God for all the blessings in your life.

I guarantee you, that the more you do these sorts of things every day, the more your life will be filled with joy.

To remain profoundly human in this way is our pearl of great price.