

Today is Life Sunday, and such an occasion affords us the opportunity to think about the sanctity of life. But is there even such a thing? Can we really claim that there is an inherent sanctity, an ethic of life, which governs the whole human race? My question is of course rhetorical. You know my answer to it already, but it's getting harder and harder to prove such a claim. The disastrous feature of our species is that we have progressed much farther materially than we have spiritually. Science and technology have certainly led to inconceivable progress. We have gained extreme power to control and change life, but the fact is that morally we are not equal to this power. In the name of cultural progress, we have actually regressed. Far from asserting our dominion over nature, we have returned to a state of nature. We have adopted nature's animalistic tendencies. And there is no attribute more animalistic, no trait more bestial, than that of indifference. We are no better than the animals when we adopt a spirit of indifference; in fact, we become like them. We mimic their behavior; we copy their way of existence. Consider the natural world. It is beautiful from a distance, a work of art really, but up close, its ruthless and barbaric. Nature itself is not governed by an internal code of sanctity. Species thrive by destroying other species. Creatures live at the expense of other creatures. Nature permits the most horrible cruelties to occur. Life comes into existence and passes out of existence without a moment's pause.

But what about us? Are we any better? Do we not inflict as much pain, and cause as much suffering, as nature itself? More actually. The reason for this unfortunate reality is that our passions lead us to pursue goods that cannot be attained by all. We all want the same things, but we can't all have the same things in equal measure. Consider how only a few can be rich while most are doomed to poverty. People strive for recognition and applause, but this can only give them real satisfaction if the majority live their lives unnoticed. We are all looking for love, but the object of our love is in a lot of cases also pursued by others, so that not everyone can satisfy his/her amorous desires. So as tragic as nature is, what's even more tragic is human nature. We become animals each time we celebrate our own power over others—exploiting, abusing, and inflicting pain to secure life's limited resources. We might call it "counting our blessings" but what we really mean is, "thank you God for giving me more". This is why indifference will always be mankind's greatest enemy. For this great nemesis prevents us from seeing ourselves as uniquely made in the image of God. Indifference teaches us to be about ourselves, to look after our own, to get what's ours no matter the cost. But in being this way, have we not just simply followed

nature's course of cruel egotism? This is not the human way. This is not the way of God. For God has placed into our very beings an exalted capacity, which separates us from the rest of the natural world. It is the capacity to transcend our self-centered impulses and feel ourselves connected to others around us. We call this feeling compassion and it's unique to the human race. We live in the world and the world lives in us. We experience the entire world within ourselves. We can feel the sufferings of other humans as if they were our own, and because of this we can relate, sympathize, and comfort. Without this capacity to feel how every life touches upon the life of another, we are no better than the animals. St. Paul says as much this morning when he proclaims, "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself."

So, what does it mean to say there is a sanctity to life? It means that we don't flinch from the challenge of compassionate awareness, we don't allow our hearts to grow numb. God has placed us within a network of intertwined lives in order for us to give and receive His love. A sanctity of life ethic, then, is not some ecological endeavor to save the planet or some humanitarian project to end all human injustices, but a divine principle of atonement. "For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord, so whether we live or die we are the Lord's". Our lives are shaped by the life of Christ who made the fate of mankind His business. He upheld the dignity of every life in the act of His universal atonement. As followers of Christ, we extend His work of atonement. We bring His redemption to bear on the lives of those around us. Wherever we happen to find ourselves in this life it is within our power to affect a redemption from the misery brought into this world by senseless cruelty. We embody Christ's atonement in that we never repay evil with evil, but overcome evil with goodness. We reconcile God to the world and the world to God. Where nature takes, we give. Where nature robs, we replace. Where nature curses, we bless. This is the essence of compassion. Christ appoints us to be His proxy; to make atonement for the devastation left in the wake of humanity's selfishness. Our hands become the very hands God employs to pick up the pieces of a broken and shattered world. Christ starts over in and through us. He restores, renews, recreates. In His very body, Christ absorbed the great contradiction of nature that to live means something else must suffer and die. Christ Himself suffered and died according to nature so that from His wounds might flow a renewed nature where death is destroyed and life is celebrated for the sacred gift it is. Amen.

~Rev. Jeremy H. Mills