

I'd like to thank Pastor Steve and the elders for the opportunity to share with you today. Today is Sanctity of life Sunday, when we are asked to consider and remember what it means to have the gift of life. Timed to coincide with the U.S. Supreme Court decisions of *Doe v. Bolton* and the more famous companion case of *Roe v. Wade*, this is a day to consider the current state of the culture of life and death that is currently being played out today in the legislatures, the court rooms, hospitals, and homes in this country. We are engaged in an ongoing struggle within this country over the very meaning of living and dying; fundamental concepts and foundations upon which decisions are made that affect each area of our lives, such as education, health care, economic policy.

How we conceive and look at the nature of our gift of life is a very basic concept, yet it is based on an even more fundamental principle, and that is the question of what it means to be human. It is on this principle that we approach the other questions of life and death, like abortion, physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, infanticide, genetic engineering. The way that I think and you think about the nature of being a person will be the primary determination of how we think about these issues as well as other essential questions, such as the nature of justice and the meaning of suffering.

What I would like to do for the next few minutes is unpack what I've said above and try to explore some of the ways that this plays out in real life. If you were to ask what it means to be a human person to people in our country, I think you would find that most people would probably give you a blank stare and wonder what you are talking about. It's not the kind of thing that you go around thinking about during the day. If I was to look at my wife's list of things to do during the day, I would probably find buy groceries, volunteer at school, go to Target, go to Wal-Mart, and do laundry on her list on a regular basis. Considering the nature of her humanity has not made the list to the best of my knowledge. My office staff has questions about what diagnosis to code, which hospital I am working at, and whether I can fix the computers. We haven't discussed the question of human existence and its meaning. Well, actually we did a couple of weeks ago. I told them I was preaching today and they asked what I was going to talk about. I gave a very brief sketch of what I was planning on going to say. They had lots of questions and seemed interested, so I figured I'm probably on the right track. But for the most part, these are not the kind of things that most people consciously think about. The fact that they don't consciously think about doesn't mean they have an underlying assumption of what it is.

So what do I mean when I talk about a person? What does it mean to be in the circle of persons and why is it a big deal? So what if I'm in? This is a very important definition when talking about the life issues. For purposes for my presentation today, I define a person as a being that has possesses fundamental unalienable rights. When I talk about unalienable rights, I am talking about the things talked about in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, where it says "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Another way of putting it is that a person is a rights-bearer. Each of you sitting here has certain rights that no person or government can take away. You have them

by the fact that you are a person. They were not arbitrarily given to you by anybody or anything else, nor can they be taken away. Primary of these rights is the right to life. Why is the right to life primary? Because without life, you are unable to exercise or use any of other rights. Therefore the right to life is said to be the primary, or most important right. Now if we were to consider the chair that you are sitting on, I think we would all agree that while the chair is weight bearing, it is not rights bearing. We could use the chair for what ever purpose we so choose. We can possess or “enslave” the chair for our use, and we could ultimately destroy the chair without consideration for its existence. Now some might argue that I can’t go into the church and just arbitrarily destroy the furniture. That’s true, but the reason you can’t do that isn’t because you are violating that chair’s right to life, it is that you are violating the chair’s owner’s right to his or her property. Now for most things, the determination of whether it is a person or not is pretty clear cut. Things, like chairs, tissue paper, pencils, books and rocks don’t have inalienable rights. These things are not persons. Most people would agree with that. Likewise, each of you sitting here is a person. You have those inalienable rights we’ve been talking about. But things get more difficult when we start talking about entities such as the unborn child, the patient in a persistent coma, or animals such as dogs, cats, or gorillas. What rights, if any, do they have? This is where the controversy is centered. This is where the definition of a person makes all the difference in the world. The definition will decide where we draw the lines. If you’re on the “yes, you are a person” side of the line, then you’re protected. You’re in. If you’re on the “no, you are not a person” side of the line, then you’re out. It’s open season on you.

So, how are we to go about determining our criteria of a person? How can I tell who or what’s in? When you look at the different standards that are bandied about, it really boils down to two general categories. The first category would state that you and I are persons because we have certain capacities. We are persons because we have certain capacities, or abilities that distinguish us from those things or beings that are not persons. I would call these functional definitions of personhood, meaning that there are certain functions or abilities that we possess that make us a person. The second category is what I call the ontological category. A person is determined by what it is; namely, a human being is a person, period. It’s not what they can do, it’s what they are.

Let’s consider the functional category of persons. If something is able to perform or exhibit certain traits or abilities, then it would be considered a person from a moral standpoint, regardless of species. I’m in because of what I can do. Functional definitions would be the most prominent in the secular literature and in the academy today. Notice that there doesn’t seem to be anything intrinsically special about being human, per se. Being human is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being a person. That means that you don’t have to be human to be a person nor does being human guarantee that you are a person. It’s strictly centered on the ability to perform or exhibit certain traits. The idea is to find those unique traits or abilities that are possessed by persons but not by nonpersons.

Consider the belly button. You could propose that the criterion for being a person is possession of a belly button. Will this definition work? No. In the first place, what happens if I was to take

you to the operating room and cut out your belly button? Would you still be a person? Of course. What about other mammals? Do they have belly buttons? I think so. Are they all persons then? Most people would say no, so belly buttons would not function as a reasonable criterion for a person. But what potentially could?

There are some who propose that our ability to relate to other people and develop what's called a biographical history is what makes us a person. This means we have self-awareness and are able to relate to others, develop memories or a life story. Now this sounds a bit more like something that seems unique to us as humans on the surface. All of us here have self-awareness and an ability to reflect on ourselves that doesn't seem apparent in other species. This is the most prominent criterion that you would find in most of the current literature on this subject. However, there are some situations that seem to raise problems, or at least concerns, about this definition. Let's consider newborns. Now I will admit just as much as the next person that babies can be cute, but puppies are cute too. Babies seem to relate, but at least during the first few months, it seems to be more of a stimulus-response type of pattern. I smile at the baby, he or she smiles back. The baby feels hunger and it cries. The baby feels a wet diaper and it cries. The baby is startled and it cries. While this is relational to a certain extent, how is it different from other animals? My brother has a golden retriever named Riley. If I smile and say "Hi", he will wag his tail. If I say "Let's go for a walk", he will wag his tail. In fact, he will shake hands, high-five, roll over, beg, lie down, and fetch if asked, all the time wagging his tail and acting happy. That's more than my children could do for some time after they were born.

In fact, it's from this very situation that the extreme animal rights movement has arisen. There is a small but very vocal and powerful minority of people who propose that what we would call "human rights" be extended to other species, such as apes or even dogs and cats. It's quite easy to see the basis for this. If personhood is based on relational ability, it's readily apparent that other species have this capacity. There is some communication with chimps by sign language. They also exhibit some problem-solving skills and form bonds within their groups. There is already legislative action being taken in other countries to extend human rights to other species. Last June, "Spain's parliament approved a measure to extend some human rights to gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, and orangutans, becoming the first country to explicitly acknowledge the legal rights of nonhumans. The parliament's environmental committee approved a resolution that commits the country to the Declaration on Great Apes, which states that nonhuman apes are entitled to the rights of life, liberty, and protection from torture." This is from the London Times.

So at one extreme, we have the circle of personhood being extended wider than is traditional, with more things being let in. At the other extreme, we have the circle being tightened up, excluding humans who traditionally have been considered persons. People are getting pushed out. Consider the following question: If I was to have a major stroke and be left with severe brain damage, or if I developed Alzheimer's disease and become progressively more confused and forgetful, am I still a person? If I am born with problems with my brain or nervous system developing, like cerebral palsy or hydrocephalus (water on the brain), do I still have human rights, especially the right to life? Using functional definitions, one would have to say probably

not. Peter Singer is the Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. He is the most influential philosopher today and is widely quoted and admired within the fields of philosophy and bioethics. Time magazine within the last couple of years listed him as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. He is one of the founders of the Great Ape Project, which put together the Declaration on Great Apes which I just mentioned. He was one of early major influences on the development of the modern animal rights movement with the publication of his book, *Animal Liberation*. Professor Singer came to prominence in the ethics arena, however, when he and a coauthor wrote a book titled *Should the Baby Live?* In this book, he make the argument that being a person and therefore having those rights that go along with being a person a defined by function. Ergo, he concludes that infanticide, or killing newborns, should be legalized up to the age of 30 days. Since the time of publication, he has moved the line up to around a year of age. It's not till that time that children have enough brain development to be able to have the capacities or abilities to meet criteria for personhood as we have just discussed. If for some reason things aren't working out they way things should, then there should be avenues to allow the parents to dispose of the child without legal consequences. Likewise, if somebody develops a brain disease or condition that causes them to become severely disabled, then the option of euthanizing or killing that person should be available. This is the current state of things in some European countries, primarily the Netherlands but also Belgium and Switzerland. Legally sanctioned euthanasia has been going on for some time in Holland. Initially meant only for the terminally ill and only with consent, it has progressed to being done for just about any reason the patient wishes and in a number of cases, it is done either without consent or against the express wishes of the patient. In the last five years, protocols have been put in place to also euthanize infants who are born with severe neurological problems. This is the path that Western societies seem to be following. In our country, we're not near as far down this road. Physician-assisted suicide is legal in Washington and Oregon and it is likely that the Montana Supreme Court will hold that there is a constitutional right to die in that state in the coming year.

Let's consider another problem with functional definitions of a human person. What about human equality? We in the United States pride ourselves on saying that all men are created equal. We all have equal rights under the law because we are persons. We are all equal under the law. Justice is supposed to be blind. But how can we justify this with functional definitions of personhood? How are we equal when our functions are not equal? It's readily apparent that some people are more capable of relating and interacting than others. Some of you may be quite shy and have difficulty talking with people you don't know. I'm one of them. I would much rather be up here in front of you all talking this morning than to go to a social gathering where I don't know anybody. For me, that is painful. My oldest son Aaron can go up to any stranger anywhere and engage them in conversation at the drop of a hat. Does Aaron therefore have more personhood and therefore more rights than me? Not at home at least.

When I consider the overwhelming economic pressures that are building in the healthcare system in our country, a major fear is that cutting off the margins and the marginalized of the human race will be seen as way of relieving some of the costs that are ever increasing. I think everyone

here knows that the healthcare system in this country is under tremendous stress economically. I can tell you that death is almost always the cheapest option. What's cheaper overall, giving an elderly person with severe heart disease \$20 worth of potassium and Versed in their IV, causing a quick, painless death, or 20 days in the ICU at \$10,000/day or more with the significant possibility that he or she will die anyway? Or at the other end of life, what about the newborn with multiple birth defects? Euthanasia or two or three months in a newborn intensive care unit with a high six-figure bill at the end of it all? We may recoil at this prospect, but if you're sitting in a desk in Topeka or Washington D.C. with the financial numbers in front of you, there is a strong temptation to consider that path. This avenue is already being explored in Texas with a futility of care proposal. Under these proposals a hospital can unilaterally declare that further medical treatment is futile, or useless, in a case and then may legally withdraw and withhold all additional treatment without the consent of the patient or the patient's family. What I've shared so far is just a snapshot of what is looming on the horizon.

I would like to forth what I believe is a Biblically-based view on personhood. This is a view that provides a uniform application to all humans, thereby giving a basis for human equality. Genesis 1:26-27 is the foundation on which this is based. Let's look at it.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Here we have the creation of man, with God creating man in His own image. The Latin term for the image of God is *imago Dei*. This is the term you will frequently find in a lot of academic writing that discusses Christian ethics. Here we have the primary scriptural basis for defining a person. It is that which is created in the image of God. If you look one verse earlier at verse 25, you find that "God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good." So all other biological creatures were made after their kind, but God made man in God's image. We now have what I call an ontological definition of personhood. That means we have a definition that's based on our basic form. It's part of who and what we are. We're in because of who we are. Personhood belongs to each of us because we are human beings. We all bear the right to life; we are all entitled to protection because all of us are in the image of God. It isn't something we earn or get by being able to do something. It's something we have just because we are who we are. And you know what? Each of you is just as much in the image of God as I am. Now we have solid basis for human equality. In fact, one could argue pretty well that this is really the only solid basis for human equality.

Man in the image of God is so important that God Himself took on a human bodily existence to redeem it. In Philippians 2:6-11 we have the great passage, probably from an early hymn, on the humanity of Jesus. In verses 6-8 we find Jesus "who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a

bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” We have Jesus being made in the likeness of men. If God allowed His Son to be a man, then how important must man be; not just some, but all. Now I could go on for another hour on this but I hope that I have at least planted some seeds for thought and consideration in the future. In closing, I believe we would do well to remember the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46.

Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' Let us pray.