Each time I read this collect I want to finish that first phrase with “created and restore the human race.” But it’s not that. It’s not that God created and restored the human race, but that God created and restored the *dignity* *of human nature*.

That might sound like hair-splitting on my part, but I don’t think so. The two-fold miracle here is that God *wonderfully* created the dignity of our human nature in the first place. And then, even *more* wonderfully restored our dignity.

One metaphorical way of viewing this is that God created Adam and Eve out of mud in the garden of Eden, making them the crown of creation—the crowning act of a week-long creation project. Then, quicker than you can say but-don’t-eat-this they throw a monkey wrench into God’s plan. God says, “No more Eden for you!” and they start to make their way in the world, with some pretty spectacular miss-steps, failures, sins, whatever we choose to call them, right out of the box.

But the nature of our Creator is the epitome of the love, patience, mercy, and *dignity* to which we aspire. Continuing the biblical story, God did not simply wash those divine mud-sculpting hands and say, “Well, that was a bust” and move on to the next project.

Instead, the whole of the biblical story after that is one of immense love and interventions to save us humans from ourselves—flood, exodus, prophets (telling us what would happen if we persisted in our greed and lust for power), and more, and more.

And then God made a dramatic move to reset this all to its pristine beginnings by entering the world as a human being, born into the world as every girl and baby boy has been born. And by doing that, showing us that this is what the dignity of human nature looks like. Crossing all artificial human barriers such as ethnicity, class, nationality, and gender, God in Christ made clear that we are all worthwhile, we are all loved, and we are all meant to love each other.

All of this and more is revealed to us in Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus—to name some of those characters, including the most important one.

Another way of viewing this whole business of the creation and restoration of the dignity of human nature is to look at our own lives, starting at the purest pount—our birth into the world. Obviously, dignity here has nothing to do with outer circumstances or the tiny part of the world into which each of us is born. Not our parents, nor our community or tribe, but the simple straightforward beauty of a new human life.

And then that whole being alive in the world thing begins for each of us. Some of us have more advantages immediately than others do, and that is without doubt. But each of us has that divine spark at our center. Whether we’re born into great privilege or abject poverty, though, each of us makes decisions that cloud over the dignity of our nature with which we were born. Whether we try to explain it on the basis of upbringing, environment, or genetics is immaterial: each of us eventually makes decisions that reflect the love of God, and each of us makes decisions and takes actions that fly in the face of that original dignity into which we were created.

This is not a narrative about depraved humanity. It’s just an observation that every single one of us has the potential for dignity-affirming and dignity-negating thoughts, feelings, and actions. To make it more confusing, both types are mixed up in various proportions in much of what we say and do.

The nexus of the stained-glass biblical version and the earthy individual human one is God’s unrelenting, restorative love. For us Christians, that love finds it perfection in Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate at this time every year.

When we pay attention—and even sometimes when we’re simply oblivious—we feel some nudge of that divine love, that restoration of our human dignity. It can happen in some more or less formal event such as a wedding or a celebration of the Eucharist, and also in that welling up in us as we have helped someone to solve a problem or have been helped by someone in dealing with our own problems. It—this sense of dignity, let’s call it a close connection of our own little individual cell of humanity with someone else’s—can accompany a simple greeting and a smile while saying “Merry Christmas,” “Happy holidays,” or “Happy new year.” We remember—in our very marrow—that we are meant to be connected to each other, to all humanity, to all of creation. And thus, connected to our Creator. We might remember that such a connection is God’s more wonderful restoration of the dignity of our human nature.

Paul tells the Ephesians (and us) that this is the spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know Christ, or, more simply, as we come to know in each other God’s restoration of the dignity with which we were created. + + +

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