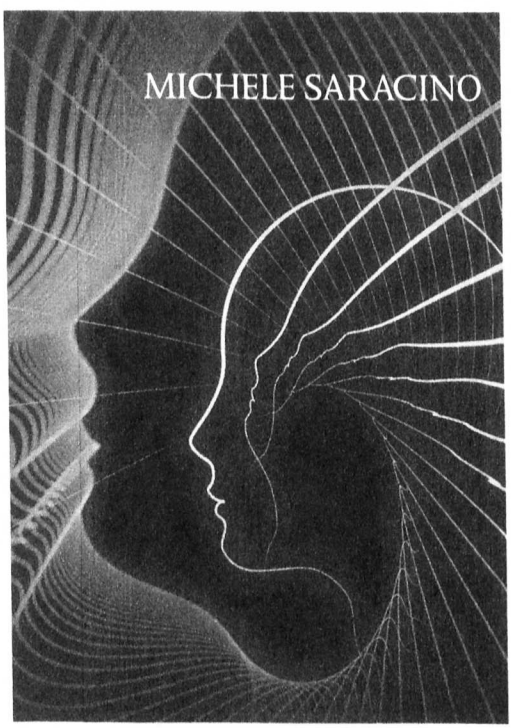
CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HUMAN PERSON



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Chapter 3

YOU'RE SO NEEDY

There are many ways to speak about being a creature, being mortal, and experiencing finitude. We could frame being a creature as being the opposite of God and as being totally other from the infinite. We could talk about how for all creatures life on earth is limited. We are born and die, and hopefully have a number of life-giving years between these two momentous events. Additionally, we could discuss creaturely existence in terms of the laws of physics since most us have experienced the basic axioms of being constrained by space and time. We know that what goes up must come down and that we cannot physically be in two places at once. And while technology certainly allows for face time across wide spans of space, we are still physically in one place and virtually in another. What's more, we cannot stop time or speed it up. It continues on whether we like it or not. All these are important angles from which to explore the finitude of creatures. Ultimately, they all point to a common experience; namely, that all creatures need others. The fact that creatures are limited by space, time, resources, ability, talent, social and political situations, and so on means that we cannot do everything by ourselves. We are dependent on others and, for better or for worse, are needy.

There is no getting around creaturely need. Plants need water and sunlight to grow. Nonhuman animals need plants and other animals to flourish. Human animals rely on others for food, warmth, and companionship. Everywhere we turn we see that every creature is needy; yet, this reality does not go down easy. In fact, it is not unusual for the terms *needy* and *neediness* to trigger a knee-jerk reaction. One of the worst things my husband can say to me is not that I am a bad wife, a mean mother, or a mediocre

theologian, but rather that I am needy. That phrase stings the most. I have always been taught implicitly if not explicitly that to be fully human means *not to need*. I should be independent, self-sufficient, in control, and a leader. Perhaps others have similar aversions to being called needy. They may feel like they are being a "nag" or being a downer, that they are holding others back because of their neediness. Some may even feel that if they don't stop being needy, others won't want to be their friends anymore. In many ways, social media and electric technology have exacerbated this situation of not wanting to appear needy, by encouraging us to text instead of call, email instead of write. One student told me that it is too forward to call someone that one is interested in romantically. Texting first is far less needy, and hence more attractive. From a commonsense perspective, being needy is correlative with being undesirable and unlovable.

In all likelihood, many of our responses to neediness are far more nuanced than what has been suggested here. If and when someone calls us needy, they are signaling to us that we are demanding more of them physically or emotionally than they are able to give. We may be asking too much. Perhaps a friend or loved one is hoping that we recognize their needs and give them space. What follows is a discussion of our conflicted feelings about human neediness. This is not meant to exclude other species. Quite the opposite, in exploring the ambivalent feelings human animals experience over being needy, we may gain a better understanding of the place of all animals in the cosmos and create a foundation for our green anthropology.

ORIGINS OF OUR AMBIVALENCE

Why are we conflicted or ambivalent about our neediness? Who is to blame? Enlightenment thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant are often touted as individuals in history whose thought devalued dependence on others, and supported worldviews and societies that valorized independence. It is hard to imagine, however, that this problem of not wanting to

need and our antipathy to being needy began just a few centuries ago. While the "turn to the subject" mentality of modernity, with its emphases on self and reason, certainly worsened the situation, it is probably more the case that being torn up about being needy has always been part of the human condition. Recall in the previous chapter how I noted that Reinhold Niebuhr, a prominent American Protestant theologian, argued that a fundamental challenge to being human is the stress caused by our desire to be perfect and godlike, even with the knowledge that creaturely existence is characterized by limits.

Clearly, the fear of being needy runs deep. As such, it is worth exploring where else we learn that it is bad to need. From an early age, those living in a globalized capitalist world are pressured into the mentality that the best way to be human is to surpass limits, overcome barriers, and to be independent to an extreme—to not need. This is why being called needy can be so painful. We learn that our neediness conflicts with the social norm to be in control of everything, on top of everything, and so on. It is not that our parents, teachers, or friends say dependence is bad and failure is deadly. Rather, it is more the case that we get social cues that make our neediness seem shameful and anything less than perfection seem sinful.

I clearly remember running home from high school one day years back, excited to tell my father that I received a 98 percent for my grade on an important exam. I was thrilled to see him bursting with pride. The excitement didn't last long, as he quickly asked, *Why didn't you get 100 percent?* After the exchange, we both had a good laugh. I was used to these expectations, so this is not a bad memory for me or a sad story. Rather this was the norm and the narrative that continues to drive my life today, and I would guess the lives of others. Now I am all grown up, so to speak. A parent myself, I witness my peers struggling with the performance of their kids on the baseball and football fields. They waver between being relieved that their children are holding their own on the field and holding back their parental desires to push their children to do more—to hit harder and to run faster. Parents are supposed to expect more from their children even as they support their efforts. In fact, sometimes in our quest for success we call

parents neglectful if they do not support and push their kids to or beyond their limits.

As a college professor, I witness aspects of the downside of this pushing. I meet students who are frazzled from pulling all-nighters to complete their term papers and study for exams, all to keep their high averages and scholarships. I see students who release all their anxiety in binge drinking to the detriment of their health, and perhaps in some instances, to the detriment of others around them. At the college and elsewhere, one can find pockets of conversation about the challenges of maintaining a work/life balance—meaning having a life, whether that is a family or hobbies, and being productive at work and school. Still, substantive discussions over the matter are few and far between. Most of the undergraduates I encounter are burdened by the prospect of having to manage it all—and it sometimes seems like it is just too much to bear.

As we have discussed, and perhaps experienced in our own lives, this is the shadow side of the god complex. We want to be like God or be God, and know we can't. So instead, we "settle" for thinking we can be superhuman. This too of course is impossible, but we are so ashamed of being needy that we run ourselves ragged trying to cover up and hide our limits. When we look at Genesis 2, which in many ways provides an antidote or at least a balance to the god complex engendered in Genesis 1, we see that a significant dimension of the doctrine of the human person is an embrace of this neediness. When God finds Adam lonely—in need—God attends to it. The story does not demonstrate God being angry with Adam for being lonely. God does not judge or blame Adam for not being good enough; rather, God is portrayed as being there for Adam in his loneliness. Neediness is not demonstrated as a sin; rather, as a fact of earthly being. Most important, Adam's need creates the opportunity for a deeper relationship between Creator and creation.

At face value it appears that human neediness is distinct from that of many of the other creatures on the planet. There are plenty of creatures that have been observed in nature that seem to not need as much as humans. For example, after lemon sharks are born, they are forced to survive on their own in the shallow areas

of the shore. However, they still need. They need the plants of the seascape to camouflage themselves from predators and they need other creatures for food. Unlike sharks, orca whales are vigilant about the welfare of their young. Orca calves could not survive without their mothers' milk and without learning how to hunt. Both species need, but it is fair to say they have different levels of needing others.

This is a significant point, because one could make the argument that some species have more value than others, depending on their level of interaction with and neediness for another. That is a problematic claim because while there may be different levels of neediness among species, all species need others for flourishing and survival. To make this point clear, let's return to the plight of sharks. Even though they don't need their parents to hunt, sharks of all kinds need their fins to swim. If sharks can't swim, they suffocate and die. What we are finding today is that human animals in particular are denying this need and are mutilating sharks at exponential rates. It is estimated that anywhere between 26 and 73 million sharks are finned each year, a rate that is not being matched by shark births.[1] Fins are used for the delicacy of shark fin soup, and other shark body parts are used in cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. The challenge for Christians today is to accept the neediness of all creatures and to be responsible to that neediness. Why do we choose our wants—here, shark fin soup and wrinkle-free faces—over the other's needs for survival?

NEEDINESS AS A CONNECTOR

If our aversion to neediness was not a problem, there would be no reason for this chapter. However, it is hurting us. In avoiding neediness, we avoid our reality as creatures, and our calling to live in full communion with God and others. We miss out on potentially life-giving relationships. We don't think we need sharks, so we do not necessarily have them at the forefront of our minds when making decisions. The truth is that we may not need this or that individual shark, but we do need the aquatic ecosystems to be in good shape so we can be in good shape—and sharks, like many other forms of marine life, are integral to a healthy ecosystem.

When framed this way, that we need the other and the other needs us, neediness serves as a connector in that it propels us into life-giving relations with others and has the potential to give birth to a host of other relationships. The situation of parents caring for their newborn child comes to mind here. Babies need personal contact, as clinicians have long claimed that touch is a significant factor in development. Moreover, babies need nourishment, and caregivers need to provide that nourishment every few hours. Children who don't get these basic needs met fail to thrive. Providing for these basic needs demands hard work. Caring for young children in particular can be exhausting, especially having to get up for those middle-of-the-night feedings. The parent, particularly the nursing mother, needs sufficient hydration and nutrition too. This catapults the new mother into at least two trajectories of relationship—the intimate one she shares with her dependent child, and the others she shares with the people she relies on for food, including friends, relatives, and most definitively farmers and grocers.

This domino effect of needing is also evident in situations where people are caring for their aging and infirm parents. Adult children cannot sustain care for their elderly parents without proper rest and support. They depend on social workers, friends, family members, their church communities, and so on to keep going. When my mother was in a skilled-nursing rehabilitation facility, I found the network of nurses, therapists, counselors, and other people like me—meaning those children caring for their parents—to be my lifeline. My neediness, precipitated by my mother's need, created an opportunity to build relationships and create community.

Arguably when framed as a connector, human dependence on others—all others, including nonhuman animals and plants—can change the way we think about the entire planet. We might begin to view existence as a network of relationships with the other that requires care and respect, rather than use and abuse. If we are honest about our dependence upon the earth, including our need for clean air and the joy that the beauty of nature brings, then we might pause before overusing it.

EMBRACING THE GRACED NATURE OF FINITUDE

In giving credence to the notion of neediness being a good thing in that it connects us to others, readers are asked to consider how they might embrace the graced nature of finitude in their everyday lives. *Grace* for Christians is an important term in theological anthropology. It refers to God's offer and gift of relationship to creation. It is not something that creatures initiate because they cannot control God. And theologically speaking, orthodox teaching maintains that grace is not something that can be earned. While our actions may enhance our relationship with God, they cannot create it. Grace is that which orients all creatures toward God and sustains creaturely existence. It is the spirit that initiates existence and keeps free existence going. Without God's grace, creation ceases to exist.

Just as we lack total control over grace, we as creatures have limited control over all our relationships. That is not to say that we don't have freedom in them. To be sure, we will see in the next chapter that freedom is a significant aspect of creaturely existence. We are always granted by God the freedom to say yes to the relationships in which we find ourselves. That yes-saying is quite elaborate, painstaking, and context-driven. As such, saying yes to another, whether that other is God or a creature, is only possible when we recognize them as another, meaning when we recognize our limits and our lack of total control over them. We need to embrace our limits—space, time, ability, and so on—before we can reach out in genuine openness and say yes to another. Consequently, finitude—meaning our limits, borders, and needs—creates a context for our freedom to be actualized. When read this way, finitude is a gift in that it puts us in close proximity with the other; so close that our need for and connection to them becomes irrefutable. It draws us into relationship with them.

I am painting a pretty rosy picture here. It would be wrong to glamorize finitude in a culture that seems to despise it. Nonetheless, without exposing ourselves as needy, we can never be in a genuine relationship with God or the other. Genesis 2 becomes

relevant here. Again it is in that story where God recognizes Adam's need and tries to satisfy it with the companionship of others. We all need, and human beings in particular need the love of others. We can neither survive nor flourish in this world alone. Embracing neediness and exposing this characteristic to others has the potential to bring us into more life-giving relationships. It has the power to heal our loneliness and create community.

EXPOSURE AS A GOOD THING

It may seem strange to use the word *exposure* when talking about neediness. Everything about the word seems so tawdry—it may bring to mind individuals exhibiting inappropriate social behavior by revealing their private parts, or a shameful moment of being caught cheating or stealing. One is right to wonder if the term *exposure* has too many negative connotations to be considered a good thing, never mind something spiritual. It is precisely because of the discomfort it causes that *exposure* is a helpful term for reimagining human existence as green and other-oriented. In revealing one's humanity to the other—one's neediness, as awkward and unsettling as it is—one creates an opportunity for relationship.

A first step in embracing exposure as a good thing that could move us toward life-giving relationships is ceasing to conceal our human frailties. After all if we cannot accept our own limits, how can we accept and aid others as they struggle with their human frailty? A second step is giving up on the myth that we can somehow control every aspect of our embodied beings. That means we need to let go of the idea that our bodies are machines, and that if we tinker around with them enough they will run just how we want.[2] We need to relinquish the idea that we can control every relationship in our lives and secure some good outcome in them. Sometimes, we can give our all to a relationship and it still dies.

To be sure, exposing the myth of being totally independent, in control of our minds and bodies, and masters of all relationships is dangerous emotional work. Nothing about this orientation toward others, toward an embrace of neediness, is going to be comfortable. The most obvious risk of exposure involves losing

the façade of having it all together or the façade of not being lonely. As some have experienced, in order to be attractive to others in a culture of not-neediness, there is a lot of peer pressure to keep the secret that we are in fact very needy.

It is worth trying this as a personal experiment. When with a group of peers, admit to feeling scared about something, perhaps being alone or not being able to achieve a goal. There might be some resistance to your exposing yourself, in the form of people cheering you on, assuring you that you are not alone or that you can achieve your goal. The peer pressure to be okay and in control could make you feel even worse. Alternatively, your admission of neediness could have another, more positive effect. Others might take your admission as an opportunity to share their fears. While very little in consumerist culture predisposes us to this type of exposure, it could prove rewarding and connect us to others in ways we never imagined.

There are times in our ordinary lives in which we are involved in this type of exposure without realizing it. For instance, when we ask for forgiveness from someone or when someone apologizes to us, we are participating in an event of exposure by admitting we need that person and their relationship. There are other opportunities for exposure. After experiencing the breakup of a serious relationship, one's friends and family might encourage one to "get back out there." This usually means to begin going out socially and even dating again. Getting back out there is a precarious situation because it means making oneself vulnerable to loving again and risking the pain and hurt of rejection. It involves exposing oneself to an unpredictable relationship, not necessarily a rocky one, but a difficult one, like most relationships, to fully control. We are at the mercy of the other's actions, likes, and so on.

This is all part of the complexity of dependence. It is not just that we have to admit our need for others. It is also being open to their responses to our admission. Since others have their own minds, wills, experiences, styles, and so on, we cannot always easily anticipate and control how they will respond to our neediness. We are in many ways hostage to the unpredictability of their living and loving. This makes us feel uncomfortable and exposed. To be sure, exposure can take many forms, and here I am emphasizing

emotional exposure, which includes a willingness in some contexts to wear one's heart out on one's sleeve, not necessarily being a burden on others, but rather revealing one's humanity in all its need.

Embodying a more humble posture is another form of exposure. Crouching down to speak with children seems to aid in connecting with them. Speaking with students in a relaxed posture with my arms at my sides rather than with my arms crossed seems to make me more approachable. Being attentive to our bodies in space in relation to others—all others, including nonhuman animals—creates a situation of intimacy, which allows a more open engagement to occur. I notice sometimes that if I let a dog approach me before I pet him or her, I have less fear and perhaps the dog has less fear and we have a better encounter. This type of exposure is about deferring to the spatial and sensual needs of the other before trying to get our own needs satisfied. And here it is easy to see that neediness goes both ways. I am needy and so are others, and at times it benefits all to defer to the other's needs before one's own.

Another way people can cultivate exposure in their lives is by making choices for their lives that are live-giving in the long term. To this point, embracing finitude may call us to admit that many of the stories we live by do not always brings us what we need most. For instance, we will see toward the end of the book that in figuring out what we are called to do with our lives—what our vocation is—we first need to be honest about everything we have been told about what it means to be successful and have a good job. Is a successful career one that brings in tons of money, perhaps at the expense of the needs of another, or is it a career that might not pay as much but enables one to lead a modest life and feel good about what he or she is doing and why he or she is doing it? This is a difficult conversation to entertain because often we get our sense of what is job-worthy from our parents and other loved ones whom we trust and respect. In questioning their ideas about success, we risk losing their love as well as their support. However, it could also be the case that such a tough talk could birth a new level of intimacy between the child and parent. This

is all very complicated emotional work. There is no one right solution here.

There are other aspects in our lives in which we may find opportunities for exposure, including in our choices of friends and romantic partners. Are we open to friendships that challenge us to think, act, and love in new and hopefully more life-giving ways? Are we able to stay in a friendship during the rocky times, whether that means times of our friend's neediness or, perhaps even more difficult, our neediness? Are we capable of entertaining a difference of worldviews without resorting to leaving the person or hurting them? Throughout this book there is going to be a clear emphasis on the biblical mandate to love the other as one would want to be loved. The other here can be one from another culture, class, religion, or even another species. The risk involved in these relationships is an openness to be uncomfortable, wrong, and converted by the other.

In the chapter on forgiveness and love, we will further explore how exposure can unfold in all types of relationships, including romantic ones. For now it is probably enough to say that in many pockets of consumer culture, we have reduced relationships to a transactional connection, meaning we look at potential partners in terms of what they can do for our image and status. This is not because we are intrinsically mean or hurtful, but because we have a truncated sense of what love is and what it can be. Perhaps exposure in romantic scenarios involves working toward relationships that nourish the whole person, not just our outward appearance. Just admitting that the patterns of relationships we are in are not always life-giving is an act of exposure and an opportunity for transforming our lives.

VULNERABILITY AS A VIRTUE—THE WORK OF JEAN VANIER

So far the idea of exposure has been promoted as a way to embrace finitude and connect with others in an effort to honors God's gift of grace and create a more life-affirming existence. The idea is that if we recognize our dependence on others and our

limits as blessings rather than curses, we might find new opportunities to relate with God and all creatures on a deeper level. Another way of talking about this is framing finitude and the vulnerable feelings that accompany finite experience as virtuous. And very simply, here *virtue* and *virtuous* are terms that refer to behaviors that cultivate goodness and life.

Jean Vanier, as previously mentioned, is a Canadian Catholic thinker and humanitarian who has devoted his life to demonstrating that vulnerability, far from being aberrant and abject, is a universal and transcultural norm in all creatures. He is the founder of L'Arche, a worldwide network of residential communities where abled and disabled individuals live in community sharing Christian fellowship.[3] As a young man Vanier was struck by how people with disabilities in some sectors of society were treated, as unlovable, deviant, and unworthy of friendship. These L'Arche communities provide a place for individuals with such disabilities and challenges to live with others in dignity and love, and for others who are more typically abled to learn about humanity and community from their interactions with each other. Most generally, for Vanier, exposing our vulnerability is a catalyst for enacting genuine freedom in our lives. In these L'Arche communities, like in all communities, everyone is vulnerable. The person with challenges needs the other for assistance and companionship, and the more typically abled individuals feel exposed in their fears of the other and are healed by their work together.

Vanier's life work responds in many ways to much of what already has been said here, namely that we are driven by the need for perfection and become paralyzed by a fear of failure. In the end, these tendencies cut us off from connections with others. What is so fascinating about Vanier's written and practical works is that he sees embodied vulnerability—meaning the concrete challenges of eating, praying, and speaking for those who have disabilities—as a moment to embrace our true needy selves and the neediness of others. Living in community with the other and exposing ourselves to the physical, emotional, and spiritual nakedness of the other and ourselves is what makes us human. Nakedness is a metaphor for being exposed. Most of our lives we feel naked, existentially, in that we feel like amateurs, yet we

spend tremendous resources, including time and money, on hiding that nakedness. What Vanier's life work shows is that revealing our nakedness is a way to create relationship. When we need assistance with food preparation or even eating, it creates opportunity for community. When we need companionship because we are lonely and perhaps have experienced abandonment, it creates opportunity for community. We will return to Vanier's work in later chapters. For now I am suggesting that we consider this idea that neediness in the form of emotional, physical, and spiritual nakedness has the potential to build community across creation.

NEEDINESS AND THE EARTH

If exposure to the other is a good thing in that it creates community and richer relationships, in the face of mass extinctions, how might we reimagine human animals exposing their needs for all others as a good thing? Could such exposure change the way Christians understand the environment and their place in it? Important to this conversation is the work of Seàn McDonagh, who was previously mentioned in the introduction. His work, *The Death of Life*, calls Christians to be attentive to the ill effects of environmental degradation and poses the exponential extinction rates as a life issue.

Most significant for the discussion here is McDonagh's claim that embracing our neediness can have a positive impact on the world. His point is that in giving up the façade of being in total control, we become oriented to conceptualizing our place on earth with other nonhuman animals and plants in more complex ways. More to the point, becoming cognizant of our dependence on the balance of the ecosystem allows us to live differently or, as he puts it, calls us *to live lightly* in relation to our responsibility to the world, including all the creatures and plants around us. To live lightly means to live in a way that respects the needs of others. To live lightly means to acknowledge that human well-being depends on the well-being of others, so we cannot and do not hoard all resources for our own gain.[4]

This is the difficult task of exposure because it forces human beings to admit not only that we hog resources, but even more,

that we have very complicated feelings about giving up that privilege of having and taking in the creaturely hierarchy. With McDonagh's points on the table, Christians are called to give up and change their ways. This giving up is not easy. As stated from the outset, we need to mourn what it feels like to be the center of creaturely existence. We need to mourn our monopoly on the mind and moral superiority. It feels comfortable to live as if human animals are the most valuable creature in the cosmos, as if we are not needy, and as if we have complete domain over territory. Some of us are so comfortable that even talking about the problems of this attitude can be unsettling. But if things are going to change, we need such honest talk and affective openness, so we are ready for a new form of being human.

The language of mourning is helpful here because it would be wrong to admit that humans are not attached to the idea of being privileged in this way. We need to tell our stories about how attached we are to our old ways and how scared we are to live lightly. Such storytelling is ambivalent at best. There is so much to relinquish and, like the Rich Young Man in Mark's Gospel, many of us will walk away grieving. When he asks Jesus what he needs to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus answers, "You know the commandments." After explaining to Jesus that he has kept them his whole life, Jesus replies, "'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."[5] In the face of environmental degradation, human animals are called to grieve for their way of living under the pretense of not being needy, in order for a new type of existence to emerge.

VULNERABILITY AND THE CROSS

For Christians, Jesus' ministry and death provide a model for exposing ourselves to neediness, embracing our vulnerability, and mourning our comfortable way of life. Vanier refers to Jesus in the Gospels as a messiah who calls all to the table—not just the

popular ones, but the sick, the poor, and the outcasts. In a way, this first century Palestinian Jewish man made exposure his way of life. While Jesus, as he is pictured in the New Testament, could have chosen a very different life, certainly a less dangerous one, he sought out the marginalized and in doing so became marginalized. He made embracing the vulnerability around him what we would call a virtue.

There are so many examples of Jesus being exposed by the needs of the other. Elsewhere, I have referred to Jesus as other-oriented—a disposition that came with a cost: his life.[6] Here let's take a closer look at Jesus' interaction with one particular relentless other. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus leaves town for some much needed rest. His celebrity follows him, however, and he is hounded by a Syrophoenician woman. When this foreigner, a Gentile and a woman, "begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter," Jesus responds rather uncharitably, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Nonetheless, she does not stop there and challenges Jesus to give up the pretense of being better than her; after all, he is equating her "other" status to that of a dog. In a clever and direct way, she responds, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."[7] She does not deny being an other, being needy, and being like a dog; instead she reminds Jesus that we all need. Because of her rejoinder, Jesus is moved—converted even—and her daughter is healed. This encounter is a biblical example of how even Jesus has to recognize need as something worth reward.[8]

Stories of Jesus eating with the tax collectors also demonstrate how Christians should value need as a relationship builder. Here is an example from the Markan Gospel: "As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no

need for a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'"[9] Here human need becomes the priority, not something to be avoided; rather, to be embraced. In both these scriptural stories, Jesus shows that we need others, and that for deep relationships to develop one is obligated to be open to being wrong, insecure, and stripped of social status in order to attend to another's feelings of vulnerability and need.

Nowhere is vulnerability more sacralized than in the crucifixion, where Jesus dies at the hands of the Roman Empire in a most humiliating and tortuous way for those in need. His death was political punishment for his inclusion of the needy into his mission. He was upsetting the apple cart, so to speak, or disturbing the status quo by insisting that the marginalized deserved compassion and care. And for this hospitality to others, he was persecuted. Christians are taught to believe that he felt the pain of the crucifixion, dying by mutilation and suffocation. He did not avoid his human frailty on the cross; he chose it freely. That was part of his yes-saying. As a result, the cross becomes a symbol for Christians of the power of embracing human vulnerability. The Christian belief in a messiah who publically suffers and dies, is mocked and scorned by Roman authorities, and is taunted for not getting himself off the cross, is reverence for the power of human frailty.[10] Jesus is shown to reject all worldly desire for a boundless existence; and in solidarity with all of creation, dies like we all will someday. It is important to note that while Christians believe that Jesus made the decision to embrace this death, not all suffering in life is voluntary. Thus Christians need to be careful when conflating suffering and death with exposure. For example, one would not want to glorify the suffering associated with poverty or exploitation. These are not choices to which one says yes; rather, due to complex situations some end up in dire straits.

SUMMARY

So far we have studied two influences on creation, the Creator's infinity and creaturely finitude. We looked at the human animal's ambivalence toward finitude when it presents as neediness, and suggested that human beings need to relearn what it means to be

a creature, to have limits, and to be dependent on others—not with a begrudging tolerance but with a graceful posture toward neediness. It is not as if trying to do better on a test is a bad thing. It is not that we should not push ourselves to be all that we can be. Rather, the problem is when we hate ourselves for "failing" to go it alone, to be even better, or to be in total control of ourselves, and we end up feeling sad or angry and cut ourselves off from life-giving relationships. In other words, we end up hurting ourselves. In the next chapter on freedom we will explore the dynamic relationship between creator and creation, and reclaim finitude and neediness as a motivator for genuine freedom.

EXERCISES:

1. **Complete a journal entry on this topic.**
2. **Think-Pair-Share** (Reflect on these questions silently, find a partner and discuss them together, and then share with the class.)
   - Think about your living space. List several things you own that you consider needs, versus things you want. How does it feel to imagine your life without your wants? Is it a loss?
   - Do you think individuals with physical and emotional challenges today are otherized and marginalized? If so, why and how?
3. **Creative Time**

   Get into small groups. As a group create a script about dealing with conflicts with others and/or admitting one has failed and been wrong. Perform the skit in front of the large group. After the applause, discuss as a large group how exposing one's vulnerability unfolded throughout the entire creative process.

NOTES

1. Oceana: Protecting the World's Oceans, "Shark Finning," http://oceana.org/en/our-work/protect-marine-wildlife/sharks/learn-act/shark-finning.

2. For more on the problem of controlling one's body, see Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 93–106.
3. For more on L'Arche, see http://www.larcheusa.org/.
4. McDonagh, *Death of Life*, 119–52.
5. Mark 10:17–22 (NRSV).
6. Michele Saracino, *Being about Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011).
7. Mark 7:26–30 (NRSV).
8. For more on the intricacies of this relationship, see Claudia Setzer, "Three Odd Couples: Women and Men in Mark and John," in *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother*, ed. Deirdre Good (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 75–92.
9. Mark 2:14–17 (NRSV).
10. See Mark 15:21–32 (NRSV).