

February 7, 2021
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
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Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

It seems to me that much of what we supposedly profess by default as Christians, even regarding the important tenets of the Christian faith, we barely even think about. It's all just there, swirling around us, sort of like oxygen being part of the air we breathe. When it comes to breathing, most of us don't think about oxygen until we can't get enough of it. But if a problem is developing, it's best to notice the situation before it becomes too dire. It might be fair to suggest that Christianity itself is having some metaphorical breathing problems right now. So maybe it's a good time to give some attention to the metaphorical oxygen in the Christian air.

I'll admit that the important mysteries of the Christian faith are likely to remain beyond the scope of my true understanding. Incarnation? Crucifixion? Resurrection? Trinity? Fortunately, as I see it, understanding is unnecessary. We are swept along courtesy of our mere passive assent that these mysteries contain truths of vital importance. On the other hand, there's something to be said for trying to break those truths open, at least a little. As we do so, we learn things about God, about God's creation, and about being human.

One of the central doctrines of the Christian faith is this: Jesus Christ was both human and divine. On the surface that sounds simple and straightforward. But it took a long while for early Church theologians to work out the particulars. They addressed disagreements about this and other issues by dividing competing concepts into buckets labeled "Orthodoxy" and "Heresy." Some of those heresies were popular enough to get names. When it comes to the divine and human nature of Jesus, some of the more important heresies were these:

- *Adoptionism*: the belief that Jesus was born merely human and later became divine, his overall excellence earning the adoption as the divine Son that God granted him.
- *Docetism*: the belief that Jesus was *only* divine and *never* human, and his earthly body was just an illusion.
- *Monophysitism*: the belief that, while Jesus had a real human body, his *nature* was only fully divine.

Well, all of that was rejected, and instead the church affirmed that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. But if we look at those three heresies, we can see at least one thread running through all of them: the reluctance to allow that divinity and humanity might co-occur, and maybe even a suspicion that the flesh isn't good enough for such holiness. The winning side apparently felt that the flesh is in fact quite good enough. Now, I'm not much of an orthodoxy police officer. But in this case, I pretty much want to stick with orthodoxy, which states unequivocally that Jesus *was* both fully *divine* and fully *human*, for the entire time of his existence here on Earth.

Most years, I offer a sermon about God opting to come to us as human, a subject that's dear to me, during Advent or Christmas or shortly after Epiphany. I'm running a bit late with that this year. I think that's not because it's less important this year, but perhaps rather because it feels more important than ever. I've been thinking about this off and on for weeks, at least since the first Sunday of Advent, and finding myself unable to funnel my many random thoughts into a coherent message. I don't know that I yet have a single coherent message, but I'm going to go ahead and offer a few thoughts.

First, let's look at today's Gospel reading. In last week's Gospel reading, it was the Sabbath, and Jesus was at the synagogue in Capernaum, where he taught and cast out an unclean spirit. Today's Gospel reading picks up right where that one left off. It's still the Sabbath, and Jesus goes from the synagogue to the house of Simon Peter, where he cures Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. Jesus may not want those unclean spirits blabbing, but someone does, and the news gets out about what Jesus is up to. Once the Sabbath ends at sundown, the people are free to move around, and they come to him in droves. Jesus cures the sick and casts out demons. He goes off to pray. And he does a whole lot more: people are searching for Jesus, so Jesus decides to go to the people.

Remember, this is the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark, and Mark has given us a glimpse of what the human Jesus intends to do with his divinity. What we see here is God wading into the hardest parts of human experience. Whoever needs care, receives it. There's no test of worthiness, no gauge of comparative need. Jesus' *divinity* gives him the power to do all this. But maybe it's his *humanity* that makes him *want* to do it.

Over the past year, I think we've spent a lot of time re-learning what it means to be human. Part of what I think we're being forced to come to terms with is this: just how vulnerable human beings are to pestilence, and I mean by pestilence I mean something very broad. Human bodies are susceptible to takeover by a tiny virus; human minds are susceptible to takeover by a consuming hatred. We have now witnessed this on a massive scale, and we are only beginning to deal with the results.

Whatever the threat, maybe it makes sense that our salvation comes from one who is both fully human and fully divine. Remember, those early theologians got stuck on Jesus' humanity. But maybe that was the only way God could truly understand who and how we are. Maybe that's the only way God could truly be with us.

Let's think about that fully human Jesus. The Gospels tell us about the temptations he faced in the desert. I imagine that we got only the Cliff Notes version of Jesus' temptation. If Jesus was fully human, he faced many more varieties of temptations than the ones described in the Gospels. Maybe he faced the temptation to despair of his own self-worth. Maybe he faced the temptation to dismiss his own suffering. Maybe he faced the temptation to disguise his unique gifts. Or maybe he faced the temptation to discount all these things in others.

You can hear in what I just said echoes of why I kept getting stuck in my thinking about all this. The news of recent months has been dominated by two themes: the coronavirus pandemic and racial justice. That second issue is really about more than racism. It's about a big bundle of stuff that includes racism and anti-Semitism and homophobia and even misogyny; it includes lying and objectifying and marginalizing. On the one hand, I want use this dual nature of Jesus to comfort; on the other, I want to use it to confront.

Let's do the confronting first. And to do that, let's talk about *dehumanization*. To use my own short definition, dehumanization is denying that some humans actually qualify as human. This frees the conscience of those inclined to *treat them* as less than human. In recent weeks, I've stumbled on several references to dehumanization and the issues of our time. One reference was in Isabel Wilkerson's book *Caste*, which a group of us read and discussed the last couple of weeks. In the book, Wilkerson offers some specific examples of how Black people in America, Untouchables in India, and Jews in Germany were so "othered" as to be pushed right out of the category of human.¹ While our concern ought to be first for those dehumanized, Wilkerson also offers a reminder that the process of dehumanizing *some* ends up dehumanizing *everyone*. And she reminds us of how much quiescence is necessary to keep it all going. In a sense, that, too, becomes like oxygen—or perhaps a contaminant—in the air we breathe.

Coming from another perspective, author, professor, and Episcopalian Brene Brown, addressing the riot at the Capitol Building, warned against the temptation to dehumanize the rioters, saying we should never go down the path of dehumanizing anyone. It's a slippery slope that is just too risky. Instead, we need to call people to account.²

This is probably a good place to remember that, in actuality, humans lack the power to dehumanize. Genesis says that God made every human being in the image of God. No one can take that away. For Christians, Jesus affirms that humans carry the spark of the divine. No one can take that away, either. But some try. Any attempt to day someone's humanity is also an attempt to deny their divinity.

Now comes the comfort part. I'm not sure I have ever felt more human than I do right now. I wish I could say I have never felt more divine than I feel right now. Divine is not quite the right word that I'm looking for there, but maybe you know what I mean. We're all trying to get through these tough times. I expect that we're all trying to function at the level that society continues to expect of us, and we're doing that under impossible conditions. Being human is not about meeting a standard of perfection that even Jesus would have found impossible to attain, one that Jesus wouldn't have even tried to attain. Such high expectations only cause us to dehumanize ourselves. Dehumanizing ourselves only inclines us to dehumanize others. Jesus healed because he was both fully human and fully divine. It's more than okay for us to be human, *and* to believe that we carry that spark of the divine.

At least today, I'm going to remember very consciously that God came to us as Jesus both fully human and fully divine. Jesus had a body and that body was the location of suffering. He suffered in body and in mind and in spirit. I don't see any reason to assume that Jesus' only suffering was on the cross. When we are suffering, when any human suffers, God understands.

Notes

¹ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020). She specifically addressed the subject of dehumanization in the chapter titled “Pillar Number Six: Dehumanization and Stigma,” which begins on page 141.

² Brené Brown, on her podcast *Unlocking Us with Brené Brown*, the episode titled “Brené on Words, Actions, Dehumanization, and Accountability,” January 13, 2021.