

“Caution: Humans Ahead!”

Matthew 4:12-22; I Corinthians 1:10-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might trust in your
grace and learn to share it with one another. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

We usually think of turning to the Bible to find divine inspiration. But this week, as I read our scripture passages, I couldn't help but notice how much humanity is packed in here. It's not that God isn't present, but these readings are just so full of humans being human. I guess it's fair to say that one of the unofficial mottoes of Christianity could be “Why not both?”

That is, after all, in some sense, what the Incarnation is all about. Not divinity OR humanity, but divinity AND humanity. Divinity in humanity, divinity among humanity, divinity within humanity, divinity near humanity. There are lots of prepositions; I could go on, but I think you get the point. All of which is to say, it's ironic how often we find ourselves surprised by the church being full of humans being human. It was literally built that way; it could not be any other way. And yet, so often, we seem to expect it to be otherwise.

Perhaps I should be more clear what I'm talking about. First of all, there's the structure of the New Testament itself. Just last week, we read a story of the call of Andrew and Peter from the gospel according to John. And then today, we read a story about the call of Andrew and Peter from the gospel according to Matthew, and

did you notice how those two stories didn't really have much in common? We have four gospels, and they agree about a lot. But they also differ in many ways, just as any given collection of people who experienced the same thing would describe it differently later.

And then there's that word "immediately." Matthew borrows this wholesale from Mark, who practically seems like his favorite word is "immediately." But it makes me suspicious. They didn't pause to think things through? They just dropped what they were doing and took off? Did James and John say good-bye to their dad, or just walk away "immediately"? Did it maybe just feel like it all happened so fast it could be described that way? Or, on the other hand, were all of these men relatively young and still very impulsive and thus entirely likely to just walk away from their relationships and responsibilities without considering the consequences? Either way, this feel very human to me!

But really, it was the passage from First Corinthians that got my attention in this regard. First of all, there is Paul's main argument with the Corinthians, which is about unity. Left to their own devices, they have devolved into that most human of tendencies, dividing themselves into groups. "I belong to Paul." "I belong to Apollos." "I belong to Cephas." We do love to belong, don't we? But there's something limited in our scope that makes us more interested in belonging to a smaller group – one we can see the edges of and clearly identify who doesn't belong – rather than embracing the idea that we all belong to God and one another. Yep,

typical humans being human again. That limited scope of vision is part of what gets challenged when we come into contact with Christ.

And here is Paul, trying to tell them all about it. But then, suddenly, he gets distracted and starts showing his own humanity. The way our NRSV translators have put parentheses around verse 16 makes me wonder if Paul just started thinking out loud, not even intending for his scribe to write all of that down. He's just declared emphatically that he only baptized two people, so "that no one can say that you were baptized in my name." But then, he seems to pause for a second and think about it, and finally admits that "I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else." Oh, the humanity! Is it comforting or disconcerting that one of the main apostles of our tradition had a memory that bad? It's Christianity we're talking about here, so let's just go with "Why not both?"

So do you see what I mean? There are humans being human all over these scriptures, and I would argue: that is exactly the point! The core of our faith is the wondrous idea that in Christ, God was stretching Godself out to come near to us, to the point of taking on human form, because of God's astonishing love for us humans. This is a little funny, given Andrew & Peter & James and John's profession, but it occurred to me this morning that the whole Incarnation, the whole gospel is kind of a classic "fish out of water" story. The Creator becomes like the created, and is perhaps continually surprised by what it feels like to really be human. There is a little hint of this in that brief mention of Jesus calling people to repent. Honestly, that's a word I

associate much more strongly with John the Baptizer than with Jesus. But here he is saying it: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” And then the story moves “immediately” on from there, with no further explanation of what repenting might mean. It’s almost like Jesus didn’t really know how to get started, so he tried this command, but then realized that it wasn’t really connecting so instead he decided to try to relate to the people where they were. “Those guys are fishing. Maybe I can use a fishing metaphor...”

This tension that is created by the crashing together of divinity and humanity is at the center of the Christian faith. Do we pretty much always need to repent? Yes. Are we pretty much always going to be human? Yes. Is this going to be a constant source of frustration? Yes. But do you know what else? It’s precisely that complicated mess of contradictions that God loves. Having experienced us from the inside out, God is never again going to be surprised by how human we are. And I do believe that God finds us delightful. Hilarious and stupid and tragic, but also delightful. When we’re impulsive and rash, God delights in our enthusiasm. When we’re overly loyal to one particular group or leader, God delights in our passion. When we’re forgetful or try to make points in arguments that are not backed up by our behavior, God delights in our attempts to make sense of a world that is far more complex than we’re usually ready to admit. And God continues to send Godself to be with us and near us and among us and within us through Christ, so that we can keep turning back, repenting, and remembering our greater unity and love.

There is much within us that longs for a religion that doesn't much involve other humans. I notice this when I'm trying to pick pictures to put on the slides for worship. Nature scenes are so much prettier and more "spiritual." To put up pictures of people seems distracting and reductive. Which people? What kind of people? Nobody can argue with the inspirational beauty of a mountain or a sunset. This is why we hear so many people saying they connect better with God while they're camping or hiking. And there is definitely a place for appreciating the wonder of God's creation outside of the church walls. But those of us who claim to follow Jesus, whether with immediacy or trepidation, have to acknowledge that ours is a human faith that requires the presence of other humans. Other humans who are going to make human mistakes and assumptions, just like we will. The church is always going to be full of humans. And that means it will always be plagued by rash behavior and rudeness, by division and misplaced loyalties, by forgetfulness and people who would rather be fishing.

The trick is to keep trying to see all that through God's eyes. To see what is delightful about a little band of humans trying our best to serve God's people with compassion and joy. To see what is delightful about the goofy ways we come up with to celebrate, and the generosity with which we share what we've been given. To see what is delightful about how we care for one another, even when our problems and pains are tedious and never ending. Did Jesus know what he was getting into, trying to start something among a bunch of humans, trying to convince them that the

nearness of the kingdom of God meant something for how they should live? Was he surprised as just how human those humans were? Was he surprised about how it felt from the inside? I get the sense that those folks grew on him, that he came to love their foibles and weaknesses. Was there a conversation between Paul and his scribe about whether that parenthetical phrase was supposed to be included or not? Did Paul come to realize that leaving it in and thus confessing his own humanity made for a more powerful testimony than removing it?

There is another unofficial motto I like to repeat to you all, in various circumstances: Grace abounds. Because it does. Humanity endures, continuing to be human. But grace abounds, and thus the church can stand faithful. We gather here each week to turn back to that grace, to find the grace we need to forgive one another our humanness, to be reassured that our humanity is a feature and not a bug, the very thing that causes God such delight. So let us give thanks and sing, my friends, for grace abounds. Hallelujah and Amen!