

## “Being Human”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
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Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Matthew 15: 10-11, 18<sup>b</sup>-28

[God said through the Prophet Isaiah,]

‘I will bring them to my holy mountain, and bring them joy in my house of prayer...  
My house will be known as a house of prayer for all peoples...’

from Isaiah 56:7

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to recognize our common humanity, in that we are created in your image  
in all your wild diversity, yet uniquely you are God alone.

Amen

Today’s sermon title, “Being Human” –

which just so happens to be the title for a Robin Williams movie,  
was already in place before all the events reported in last week’s news,  
took place, which ranged from the inhuman to the humane.

Two series of events stand out –

atrocities by Islamic extremists against religious minorities in northern Iraq  
and the police shooting of an unarmed African-American teenager  
and subsequent rioting in eastern Missouri.

Both are exceptional examples of the all-too human problems

of prejudice and violence – and both involved children as victims.

Our scripture lessons speak to both of these situations and offer us insights  
to the human condition of ethnic rivalry and our common humanity.

The Isaiah text includes a familiar verse:

*My house will be known as a house of prayer for all peoples...’ Isa. 56:7<sup>b</sup>*

Jesus quoted this text to the moneychangers,

whom he cornered in the Temple’s outer courtyard,

after turning over their tables and freeing their sacrificial animals.

The word “prayer” in Greek, “pros-euche”, has two root meanings:

“approach” and “thanksgiving” – which means that,

to pray is basically to approach God with thanksgiving.

So, the temple, the church, the mosque ought to be places where people  
meet on their way to say ‘thanks’ to God –

and Jesus points out that this applies for all people,  
all nations, all races to be welcomed and not hindered.

So, “being human” means we share the hope for a common humanity  
even though we are perfectly imperfect in the meantime.

Willard, p.2

Jesus said something similar about children in Matthew 19:7...

*“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them;  
for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven”,*

Which reinforces something Jesus said earlier in Matthew 18:3...

*“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children,  
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

So, “being human” means we seek to realize that hope for a common humanity by becoming more childlike – and therefore, more Christ-like.

But children are the primary target of prejudice

when we consider the truth of the lyrics from the musical “South Pacific”...

*You've got to be taught To hate and fear,  
You've got to be taught From year to year,  
It's got to be drummed In your dear little ear  
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught to be afraid  
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,  
And people whose skin is a different shade,  
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,  
Before you are six or seven or eight,  
To hate all the people your relatives hate,  
You've got to be carefully taught!*

<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/southpacific/youvegottobecarefullytaught.htm>

Even so, “being human” depends upon becoming more childlike like Christ to realize our common humanity, while we are still perfectly imperfect.

Consider Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson...

How are we to sort this out with the Lord himself using epithets and displaying a cultural attitude like the other Jewish Galileans of his day?

When a woman boldly comes to Jesus

out of her desperate plight to save her daughter from a demon,  
he initially refuses to help her because she is a Canaanite.

Willard, p.3

In the Gospel of Matthew, the woman is a Canaanite  
which brings to mind the long-standing antagonism  
between the Canaanites and the Hebrews who invaded their land.

In the Gospel of Mark, the woman is Syro-Phoenician,  
a descendant of the Greeks who invaded  
Israel's land and tried to wipe out the Jewish culture.

Either way, there was a bitter history that still inspired Jewish hatred and distrust  
for these ancient enemies, even in Jesus' day, with no less animosity than  
between Israelis and Palestinians in our time.

Jesus was someone who loved God and his people,  
and would have been very passionate about disrespect or mistreatment  
of the Jewish people.

Nevertheless, this woman was determined to get help for her daughter,  
and I imagine her response to Jesus' calling her people 'dogs',  
was by no means in a subservient way.

I expect she would have spoken with some sarcasm evident in her voice,  
giving it right back to Jesus, saying,  
"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs  
that fall from their masters' table."

Her attitude would have been evident in her voice –  
but so was the truth of the matter.

Jesus saw the justice in her situation and chose to help her  
by driving out the evil spirit from her daughter.

If we go with the model that  
Jesus was all-knowing and always did the loving thing –  
and therefore, the right thing,  
then he set himself up for this encounter in order to teach the disciples  
to face their own prejudice.

However, if Jesus was just as biased as his countrymen,  
then the lesson for us all is that Jesus gained insight to his own prejudices  
from this encounter, then acted to change his attitude and behavior.

This means as human as Jesus was,  
we are no less human and that we ought to follow his example.

I've come to appreciate the idea that even Jesus could make mistakes  
and remain a balanced human being, perfectly imperfect as we are,  
equally passionate out of righteous anger and loving tenderness too.

So, "being human" depends upon recognizing our common humanity with Jesus –  
an insight related to the name of God as "I am that 'I am' that you are, too"  
and gives rise to the Golden Rule and the Great Commandment.

Willard, p.4

Robin Williams –

that childlike entertainer and humanitarian, a perfectly imperfect person who loved deeply and made his life extraordinary, died last week – a terrible loss for the whole world.

However, his passing has been the occasion to dialogue about suicide, mental illness, and prejudice towards those who are challenged in body, mind, and spirit.

Certainly in his life, “being human” demonstrated a common humanity that was Christ-like without having to say so.

In the film, “Dead Poets Society”,

Robin Williams plays an unconventional

English teacher at a boys private school in 1960.

There is a scene where he stands on his desk and invites each student in his class to do the same –to just look around and get a different perspective.

He teaches these young people to gain insight about their lives

by simply looking around to see things in a new way,

to think for themselves, to express themselves more eloquently, to live more authentically.

Robin Williams did another film around the same time called,

“The Fisher King”, which had a message for sensitizing the audience to the basic worth of homeless people and psychiatric patients as human beings deserving of respect.

The film is basically a parable based on a classic legend of the Holy Grail – in which a wounded king is helped by a simple clown, and together they find the Holy Grail to help heal the wasteland that their society had become.

It is a parable about parables – and how the principle characters take turns being either the king or the clown.

These two films have been inspirational for me –

particularly for the uses of story, and they helped me formulate a model for prejudice and its antidote empathy.

1. Parable as ‘parabola’
2. Parabolic ‘parallel paths’ – points on equal and opposite sides, like events
3. Diabolic ‘split paths’ – not this way or that, but ‘my way or the highway’
4. Parabola as ‘parallel journeys’, ‘parallel stories’
5. Empathy
6. Communion as represented by the Holy Grail

Willard, p.5

As we see ourselves in someone else's story, we have more empathy  
and put to rest fear and hatred.

“Being human” means we are perfectly imperfect like Jesus Christ  
who nevertheless was perfectly like God, too,  
and therefore, able to guide us to become true human beings;  
and we become more truly ourselves by first recognizing  
our common humanity with others –  
that we are that ‘I am’ that you are, too.

Amen

*Our lesson today comes from Isaiah 56:1, 6-8.*

*It speaks about the universal perspective that Judaism has acquired about God as God over all nations and people...*

[56:1] The Lord says:

Act justly and do what is righteous, because my salvation is coming soon,  
and my righteousness will be revealed.

[6] The immigrants who have joined me,  
serving me and loving my name, becoming my servants,  
everyone who keeps the Sabbath without making it impure,  
and those who hold fast to my covenant:

[7] I will bring them to my holy mountain,  
and bring them joy in my house of prayer.

I will accept their entirely burned offerings and sacrifices on my altar.

My house will be known as a house of prayer for all peoples,

[8] says the Lord God, who gathers Israel's outcasts.

I will gather still others to those I have already gathered.

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words.*

Matthew 15: 10-11, 18<sup>b</sup>-28[RSV]

10 And [Jesus] called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand:  
11 not what goes into the mouth defiles [someone],  
but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles [someone].”

18 ...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart,  
and this defiles [someone].

19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication,  
theft, false witness, slander.

20 These are what defile [someone];  
but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile [someone].”

21 And Jesus went away from there and  
withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

22 And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried,  
“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David;  
my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.”

23 But he did not answer her a word.  
And his disciples came and begged him, saying,  
“Send her away, for she is crying after us.”

24 He answered,  
“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

25 But she came and knelt before him, saying,  
“Lord, help me.”

26 And he answered,  
“It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

27 She said,  
“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs  
that fall from their masters’ table.”

28 Then Jesus answered her,  
“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”  
And her daughter was healed instantly.