

Phil. 2:1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We Believe: Who Is Jesus?

Philippians 2:1-11

This summer we have been devoting ourselves to a review of the things we Presbyterians believe. We began in May talking about how God reveals himself to us through the Bible; we talked about the Trinity, and then we spent a few weeks talking about the nature and characteristics of God – his sovereignty, grace, and providence. We talked about prayer, and then Erin spent a couple of Sundays talking about what we believe about us humans – created in the image of God, yet fallen sinners in need of grace. That catches us up to today as we begin to look at what we believe about Jesus – the one who has come to save us fallen sinners by grace.

Who is Jesus? It is the fundamental question of the Christian faith. Believing in God does not make you a Christian; it is what you believe about Jesus that does or does not make you a Christian, and we Presbyterians affirm the ancient claim that Jesus is the one unique being of the universe who is, at one time, fully human and fully divine; simultaneously and completely, Son of God and son of man.

Subject to the laws of nature – hunger, thirst, temptation, pain, and death

Ruler of the laws of nature – walking on water, feeding thousands on a few loaves and fishes, healing diseases, casting out demons, stilling storms, raising his friend, Lazarus, and others, from the dead.

Diogenes Allen, retired professor from Princeton Seminary wrote a book a few years ago titled, “Theology for a Troubled Believer,” and his writing about Jesus helped me put my thoughts together for this sermon. He writes, “*We may not realize that becoming human was degrading for God...an infinite step downward. God's being is infinite and for God to become human is for God [to willingly give up his infinite nature and] to become limited as a human being.*”¹

This is tough stuff for our limited human brains to deal with, and our first tendency is to over-emphasize one or the other. We tend to see Jesus as more one than the other. Some today deny Jesus' divinity altogether and say he was just a great teacher, or a prophet. The quote on the cover of the bulletin addresses that error. Most of us, though, tend to see Jesus as more divine than human. We look at his ability to perform miracles, his knowledge of some people's lives without having known them before, his awareness of his resurrection after his coming crucifixion, and we often picture him more like a Greek god – mostly God but with a human body. This is not what the New Testament says, though.

Soren Kierkegaard tells a simple story to help us better grasp what the gospels tell us about Jesus. Once upon a time there was a king who had a problem. He has fallen in love with a humble maiden, and his problem is that he wants to let her know of his love for her, but he doesn't know how. If he appears at her cottage dressed in full royal regalia with all his royal entourage, he would completely overwhelm her. And even if she manages to not be overwhelmed and proclaims her love for him, how will he know if she truly loves *him*, or if she loves his wealth and power?

One thing he could do is disguise himself as a beggar, but that would create another problem: if she proclaims her love for a beggar, what will she do when she finds out the one she thinks she loves is not who he appears to be? He is a king, but she loves a beggar. Another thing he could do is to elevate the young maiden to royal status, but that would seem to say that she is not good enough as a humble maiden, and the king loves her as she is – a humble maiden. After exploring every possible choice, the king decides there is only one possible way for him to declare his love for this humble maiden that offers her freedom to honestly declare her love for him, and you've probably guessed what it is: the wealthy, powerful king must become – not *disguise* himself as – but truly *become* a beggar, and as a beggar he can seek to win the love of the maiden.

Let's imagine what would then happen if this humble maiden does fall in love with the beggar-who-had-been-king. If she were looking to get rich in any material sense, she would be disappointed because this is, indeed, a beggar who has emptied himself of all his former wealth. He is nothing more than a beggar. But if she were looking to marry a man with the qualities of a king who is so selflessly loving that he is willing to give up everything for her, in that way, she has won herself a king of all that truly matters. For you could honestly say that this man is both a beggar and a king in every way that truly matters.

And, of course, so is Jesus both God and man in every way that truly matters. He is truly man, subject

¹ Diogenes Allen, *Theology for a Troubled Believer: An Introduction to the Christian Faith*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 96.

to all laws of nature that have their way with us. If he stepped on a nail in his father's workshop, he got a puncture wound in his foot. If the flu was going around Nazareth, he would have caught it like everyone else. Just like when the king becomes a beggar, he takes on all the problems that beggars have financially and socially, so Jesus, in becoming human takes on all the problems humans have. He did not have a superhuman body – he needed to eat, drink and rest. He did not have a superhuman mind – while he certainly had some knowledge of the future, at least in regards to what would happen to him, there were many things his brain did not know. There is no reason to believe he knew how to build a space shuttle, or even knew that one day they would exist. I personally would like to imagine that he wasn't all that good at math. Some believe he was mistaken when he predicted that he would return before the generation living at the time had passed away.

And yet, there is also true God in Jesus. The Son of God in the flesh continues also to be what he has always been, the Son of God. He is the Son of God in showing perfect love for others, in resisting all temptations to act in ways that are counter to God's ways. He may not know math, but he knows morality – the selflessness of giving yourself to the people around you. He may not know the day and year of his return, but he knows God's plan means that he will return. He is not God in human skin, and he is not a human who happens to be really close to God, he is fully human and, at the same time, fully God.

Another ancient way to understand or picture how Jesus can be both human and divine is an analogy from geometry. Imagine a flat plane that goes out forever in two dimensions as everything that we can experience as human beings. This is the human plane. Imagine also that there is also another plane that goes out forever in two directions as being the divine plane. Unless those two planes were to intersect, we humans would know nothing of the nature of the divine plane. But if those two planes were to intersect, there would be a line of intersection in which all the points on that line would simultaneously be part of both the human plane and the divine plane. If we see that Jesus is that point where the divine plane intersects the human plane, he is a part of the entire human plane, yet also a part of the entire Godly plane, and for us who know Jesus, we are not able to see the entire divine nature; there is more to God than that line where it intersects the human plane, but, where it does intersect, we are able to see God. And what we see is a God whose nature is to love; a Creator who is humble; a king who is willing to become a beggar; a king who came not to be served but to serve, a very unique kind of God, indeed.

Paul tells us in the scripture reading this morning that though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. He was fully human, or he didn't really die; he didn't really suffer for your sins and mine. If you don't really have a body, you don't really know what it feels like for that body to be whipped, beaten, stabbed, and killed.

Therefore, Paul continues, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. If Jesus had only been a man and not the son of God, his suffering and death could not have saved us from our sins. But because he loved us he emptied himself of his kingly majesty and power, and became a beggar, one of us. And he will be one of us for all eternity, just as we will now and forever be one with him...this all has been accomplished by the Son of God who is also the Son of Man. His name be praised for ever and ever.