

Jesus the Human Being: A Stunning Revelation of God

From the series: Journeying With Jesus on the Road Less Traveled

Text: Ezekiel 1:26; Luke 9:55-56

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
February 24, 2002, Lent II

Transcription of the spoken sermon

The "Reading from the Present" is in your liturgy. You can take it home. Read it this afternoon about five times and then you may get some hint as to what I was trying to say this morning. It is a writing from Walter Wink, who has done a very interesting study and has published a book now entitled, *The Human Being*. As we journey on this road less traveled with Jesus in this Lenten season, the thing that I am hopeful will come through to us is what came through in Jesus. I'm hoping that we can see through Jesus to what came to expression in Jesus. I'm going to try to chip away this morning at an idea that I hope will continue to come through this Lenten season, so that you can look back at Lent 2002 and say, "That's when Dick hammered us over the head week after week with the idea that it was not Jesus per se, but what came *through* Jesus, what came to expression in Jesus." I make that critical distinction because you see, in the Church, in the tradition of the Church, we have come to worship Jesus as God, and that was the farthest thing from Jesus' mind, that he should have been ever considered anything but a human being.

The elevation of Jesus to Godhead was the creation of the ancient Church, centuries two through five, in its creedal formulation which borrowed from the very technical, philosophical language of the Greek philosophical tradition. Jesus never said, "Worship me." Jesus said, "Follow me."

We can understand how that happened. We speak of incarnation, the Christmas miracle. We speak of God being embodied in Jesus, and one of the things that that elevation of Jesus to the status of deity has done is it has preserved over the centuries the story itself. We can see, in retrospect, how that process took place. But, it's very important for us to realize that it was not Jesus' intention that he be worshiped, but that he be followed.

Now, how do you give expression to what came to expression in Jesus? They said, "My God!" They said, "It was as though God were with us," and it was just a tiny step to go beyond to say, "Jesus is God." But what they were trying to say was that, in the experience of Jesus, they had the experience of the nearness of God,

of the grace of God, of the compassion of God, of the love of God. And so, beginning in the Gospel of John, the fourth Gospel, we have this very high doctrine of, teaching of, incarnation: famously, in John 1:14, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." Or, as John says in the 14th chapter, "Jesus said, 'If you have seen me, you have seen the father.'" Or, as Paul says in II Corinthians 4:6, "We have seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." You've heard me say that over and over and over again. Jesus is our window to God.

Now I want to make a subtle shift which is terribly important. What we have done traditionally is we have said that God became other than God is, assuming human nature, thereby revealing the nature of God. So, for God to become human was to move out of deity into humanity. Now, what if we just turned that around and said, as a matter of fact, what happened was that Jesus revealed, not the divinity of God, but the humanness of God? What if the stunning revelation is this - that God is human? What if Jesus, being a revelation of God, did not take Jesus becoming something other than God is, accepting, assuming another nature foreign and alien to God? What if the stunning revelation is that one looks at Jesus and says, "God is human."

I can imagine all sorts of bells and whistles are going off in your minds, and all sorts of questions being raised, but just let's think about it for a moment. We think that we are human. But, we're not human. Now and again, here and there we act humanely. Now and again, here and there we manage to be fully human according to that ideal that we carry with us. But, for the most part, we are in-human. We are people on the way. As Walter Wink says in the insert that you're going to read five times this afternoon, we are not yet human. We're mere promissory notes. We are mere intimations of what it would be to be human. Therefore, as another scholar has said, that famous missing link between the primate and the human that is always thrown up as an argument against evolution, that missing link isn't missing at all. It is we. We are still primates in so much of our life and human society. The stunning revelation is that God is human and calls us to be human in the fullness of the humanity as it was manifested in Jesus.

Now, that's something to think about. Let me give you a little background. I read from the first chapter of Ezekiel. The phrase "son of man" in Ezekiel occurs 93 times. That is a lot. The phrase translated "son of man" is in the Hebrew, *bin Adam*. Remember Adam? He was the husband of Eve. But, that really wasn't his name. It was *A-dam*, a creature of the earth, a human made of humus. *Bin Adam* is "a son of the human." Now, in Ezekiel's vision, it's a marvelous vision. If you read the insert five times this afternoon, read the first chapter of Ezekiel six times. It's the throne vision. It's that fun vision that is celebrated in the Negro spiritual, "The Wheel Within the Wheel." It's called the throne vision and in the opening paragraph of the first chapter, Ezekiel says, "I saw a vision of God." It's a vision, a vision. This vision of God comes down to the verses that we read, where

the prophet goes out of his way to say, "I don't really know how to describe what I'm trying to describe. It seems like this. It seems like, as it were. It had the appearance of..." Finally, he says, "It was as though this one who was revealing himself to the prophet was human."

Now, let's go to the Gospels. What self-designation did Jesus use over and over and over again? *Son of Man*. He always called himself the son of man. He never called himself Messiah. He never called himself son of God. He called himself son of Man. Son of man translated is bin Adam, or the Greek translation of that Hebrew phrase. It is interesting that the early Church took all of the exalted titles possible and attributed them to Jesus, so that the whole creedal elevation of Jesus in the early Church was by use of titles that were exalted. The early Church never used son of man in its creedal formulation. Why? Well, the best translation of son of man is human being. Some translations would say mortal, or human one, but Walter Wink, and I think he has good basis for this, said, "I think the best translation for the phrase 'son of man' out of the Greek language would be Human Being." So, what Jesus is doing in the Gospel, whenever he refers to himself as the son of man, is referring to himself as a human being.

Frankly, the Church was never very comfortable with that. The Church was never able to write any hymns or creeds that celebrated the human being, because, after all, weren't they trying to celebrate God in Christ? Surely they were. But what was missed was that the God in Christ was human. Far beyond the humanness that you and I have yet achieved, for we are people on the way and lagging all along the way, but the stunning revelation is that what came to expression in Jesus was the humanity of God. I don't have time this morning to try to go back in those Creation stories and the human being created in the image of God, but what I see in this is that our calling to be like God is a calling to be fully human.

When Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem, and he goes through Samaria, the Samaritans aren't happy with him because there is a jealousy, a terrible racial violence between Jews and Samaritans, and so they are not happy at all that he is going through Samaria to Jerusalem. The disciples recognize the resistance that he is receiving and James and John are nicknamed in the Gospels the "sons of thunder," no doubt with a reference to Elijah, the great Hebrew prophet. They say to Jesus, "Let's call down fire from heaven." Colloquially speaking, they said, "Let's blast the brothers." I don't know how they thought they could call down fire from heaven, but after all, Elijah did and consumed the prophets of Baal, so maybe it would work again. Let's show them who we are.

In a good Bible with a footnote, a very well-attested reading adds Jesus' words, "*You don't know what spirit you are of, for the human being (the son of man) has come not to destroy human life, but to heal it.*" Now, that, I believe, is pretty solid biblical basis for seeing Jesus in his full humanity as a revelation of God as human. Therefore, the call to us to be God-like is a call to be not something other than we are, alien to our nature, but to be fully human, and the calling to us as a

community is to be humane. That is not a bad place to leave it on the threshold of our annual meeting as we celebrate this community.

I mentioned Wednesday night to the pilgrim band that comes for Eucharist during Lent, the irony that it is in the Bible Belt, that it is in the religious ghettos, that it is in the places of the high concentration of conservative Christian congregations that there is altogether a lack of humane existence, that there is fear and divisiveness and an excluding of people left and right. To me, that's an irony. It says to me that maybe the people who are left in the Church by and large, in a generalization which is always dangerous, are so fearful, fearful of being pulled into this full humane existence, fearful of that which is human, striving to be divine, as it were, not recognizing that to be divine is to be human, if the revelation of Jesus is the true revelation of God. It is an irony that we have the greatest difficulty in tight Christian communities to be open to the other, to that which breaks the mold.

I am grateful for this community. As we go into this congregational meeting, I'm grateful for this community that inclusion here is more than a catchword, that we have learned the inclusivity of the grace of God and that we practice it. That we stand on our identity statement published every time we publish a liturgy, that this is a place that is open to all, regardless, that we are open to all manner and condition of humankind, because we celebrate God as creator who, in the creative initiative, has brought forth a magnificent prodigality of diversity.

We have also learned here that Jesus is our window to God, but not the only window, so that we can be open to people of other faith traditions. For, what we have learned is that our religious formulation and structure is a human, creative, imaginative construct. We made it in response to a vision, in our case, a vision of Jesus who learned a vision from Ezekiel, and the whole Christian Church in all of its forms and structures is our response to that mystery of God that came unveiled in Jesus. We respect and honor great traditions who follow other windows into the mystery of God that will always remain a mystery.

I am thankful that this community is open to all people, no matter where they are on their faith journey, and to those who cannot articulate any faith at all, but simply are seeking, and who need and desire a community of compassion that is humane.

Tonight is the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games. It has been a wonderful 17 days, beginning with that magnificent opening ceremony. If you have watched over these past couple of weeks, you have seen humanity at its best. Have you seen the faces of the camera focused, and those faces so alive, so beautiful, on bodies so trained and taut? And then, the parade of the nations, a symbol of the global community more eloquent than any sermon I could preach.

In the exhibition of skating last night, with the pressure off, Michelle Kwan, who was supposed to get the gold, skating gracefully and beautifully with her face wet

with tears for the gold that she missed, and the people loving her all the more. Or, the Canadian pair and the Russian pair whose skating brought out the supposed scandal of judging and therefore, a double gold this year, and there they were bound hand in hand, arm in arm, body to body, the four of them in a most magnificent display of reconciliation and peace. I'll tell you what - the human possibility is so magnificent. Where there is love, where there is grace, where there is humility, freedom, and openness, dear God, what we could become! What we could become is human, by God. That's a stunning revelation.

References:

Walter Wink. *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*. Augsburg Fortress, 2002.