One of Us

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The words of a 1995 song have long intrigued me: “What if God was one of us.” For you grammar junkies out there, shouldn’t the song read, “What if God were one of us?” or alternatively, “What if God is one of us?” However you parse the grammar, what if God is a regular person? As the song asks later, “If God had a face, what would it look like?” Could you pick God out in a crowd?

“What if God was one of us; just a slob like one of us, just a stranger in the bus trying to make his way home.” The thought that God is just a slob like us is rather jarring. Perhaps the song is meant to be sarcastic. Any song with a reference to the pope talking to God on the phone can’t be completely serious.

Yet the song also has a philosophical bent to it. It does pose a thought-provoking question. The writer of the song is quasi-Jewish who was raised in a Quaker school. The singer, Joan Osborne, is a lapsed Catholic, who, of late, appears to be returning to her Christian roots.

By the end of the song, after I’ve heard the what-if-God-was-one-of-us refrain over and over, I want to scream that God did become one of us. The New Testament unequivocally declares God in Jesus Christ became one of us.

We’re focusing this spring on the Apostles’ Creed. The goal of this sermon series is to take Christianity back to its essence. We want to peel away all the bric-a-brac, bells and whistles to rediscover what it means to follow Jesus.

Today, we come to the phrase, “Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.” What strikes you about this portion of the creed? My curiosity is drawn to the name “Pontius Pilate.”

When I was a child, people in my church used to recite the Apostles’ Creed from memory each Sunday. When they came to this portion of the creed, I thought people were saying, “Suffered under Pontius, the Pilot.” You know, those people who fly airplanes? I thought Pontius was that kind of pilot.

Why do the originators of this creed pick on this relatively insignificant governor? Other people besides Pilate are equally at fault for Jesus’ death. Judas Iscariot and King Herod come immediately to mind.

The Apostles’ Creed was written before the modern calendar era. Until the advent
of calendars, people would associate events in antiquity with historical rulers. That’s why Luke’s gospel reports Jesus’ birth occurs while Quirinius was governor of Syria (2:2) and Jesus’ public ministry as commencing during the 15th year of Tiberias Caesar (3:1). The reference to Pontius Pilate, who was procurator of Judea from 26-36AD, identifies Jesus within history. Jesus’ life is not the stuff of legend. He’s an actual person of antiquity.

What else do you notice about this section of the Apostles’ Creed? I’m drawn to the four words that appear in sequential fashion: “suffered, was crucified, dead and buried.” Stringing these four verbs together strikes me as rather redundant. Why go to the trouble of saying that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried? Couldn’t they have just said he suffered and died? Doesn’t it strike you, pardon the pun, as overkill?

It might help you to know what lies behind this creed. The primary heresy that provides the backdrop to the entire New Testament is something called Gnosticism. Gnostics believed the soul or spirit of a person is of vital importance. The body doesn’t have the same significance. At best, the body is immaterial and, at worst, it is evil. Gnostics venerated the soul and denigrated the body.

It was, therefore, unimaginable for Gnostics to conceive of God inhabiting a human body. So, Jesus wasn’t really human, he only seemed human. He only seemed to suffer and die.

That’s why the early church chose the words, “Was crucified, dead and buried” to express in strongest possible terms that Jesus really died. It’s a shot over the bow to body-denying Gnostics. He was crucified on a cross. He died on a cross. He was buried in a tomb.

Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Hebrews tells us that “He suffered death” (2:9). Verse 10 reads, “He is made perfect through suffering” (2:9). Later in the passage, we are told, “He himself suffered when he was tempted” (2:18). Repetition is the Bible’s way of underlining. Jesus didn’t merely seem to suffer. He really suffered!

Jesus “was crucified, dead and buried.” Hebrews tells us, in verse 9, “He suffered death.” Later in the verse we read, “He tasted death for everyone.” Verse 14 declares, “He shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.” Jesus did not only seem to die. He really died!

There are two errors people make about Jesus: one is to deny his divinity, and the other is to deny his humanity. Gnostics affirm the full divinity of Jesus but deny his essential humanity.

Christianity is the most material religion in the world.
What we do with our bodies matters to God.

Jesus was born in a body, lived in a body, died in a body and was resurrected in a body. The body is not unimportant to God. What we do with our bodies matters to God.

This thought is accentuated by the next sentence in the creed: “He descended into hell.” Some of you have asked about this confusing sentence. There are two Greek words that translate “hell” in the English. Hell or Hades is the Greek word referring to the realm of the dead. It’s the place where people go when they die. The other Greek word for hell, Gehenna, is the Greek word referring to the realm of the dead. It’s the place where people go when they die. The body is not unimportant to God. What we do with our bodies matters to God.

The traditional Greek idea of deity is one of detachment. God is aloof and distant. The Christian understanding of deity is one of identity. God in Jesus Christ shared in our humanity. He was made like us in every way. In answer to the nagging question in Joan Osborne’s song, God became one of us. We are not left to wonder what God would look like when he became one of us. God enters our world of pain and suffering. Our Creator expresses solidarity with us.

Sympathy and empathy are related words, yet they are also quite distinct. When we express sympathy for someone, we seek to understand what that person is feeling because we know other people who have experienced something similar. But empathy is the capacity to understand what someone else is feeling because we have experienced it ourselves. I may feel sympathy if you suffer from asthma, given how much pollen is in the air. But if I suffer from asthma myself, then I have empathy for your condition.

So what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Let’s return one last time to the book of Hebrews. We read, in verse 14, “He shared in our humanity” and in verse 17, “He had to be made like his brothers in every way in order that he might become a merciful and high priest in service to God.”

You may feel as though no one understands your particular situation right now. Nobody knows what it is like to be bullied in school or to struggle with infertility or to suffer from abuse and to comprehend your life partner walking out on you. But if ever you would meet someone who has experienced what you are feeling, there is such camaraderie. At last,
Jesus’ nail-scarred hands were the undeniable marks of his identification with us.

Someone understands. Finally, I know someone who truly appreciates what I am feeling.

God not only feels sympathy for our human condition. God feels empathy. God is not aloof. God enters our world. Jesus suffered and died. You can’t get any more empathetic than that!

In the early days of the Salvation Army, a man with a charismatic personality and magnetic speaking ability was traveling around the countryside claiming to be Jesus Christ returned to earth. He insisted that he was able to restore sight to the blind and perform miracles. He was able to assemble an impressive array of followers and curiosity seekers.

One evening, he was speaking in an open square in London. In the distance, he could hear the sound of approaching music. A Salvation Army band was nearing the square. This little band of musicians, with tubas and trumpets blaring, entered the square and marched to the place where the man was speaking. The Salvation Army captain motioned for the band to stop playing. He asked the speaker, “Are you really the Christ? Tell us plainly.”

“Yes,” replied the speaker. "I am the Christ returned to earth.” The captain looked warily at the man and said, “Very well, then, show us your hands.” The man’s hands were smooth. The captain instructed the band to resume playing. They marched from the square playing the hymn, “I shall know him by the print of the nails in his hands.”

When Jesus’ disciples encountered the risen Jesus after his death, they were frightened; thinking they had just seen a ghost. “Why do doubts arise in your minds? Look at my hands.” Jesus’ nail-scarred hands were the undeniable marks of his identification with us. Jesus suffered, was crucified, dead and buried. You can’t get any more human than that!

Some of you hold God away at arm’s length. You’re afraid of what God might ask you to do if you gave Him unlimited access to your life. He might ask you to give all your money away or send you as a missionary to some faraway country.

Look, God has your best interests at heart. God wants you to prosper. God doesn’t seek you harm. God promises you a future filled with hope (Jeremiah 29:11). God cares about you. More than you will ever know, God cares about you.