

“The Gift of God’s Incarnation”

To be human is a gift – and a curse.

We are created in God’s image with the power, and potential to do great things and that is certainly a gift.

And yet we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

We have sinned against God in thought word and deed by what we have done and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved God with our whole hearts; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

And all of that is certainly a curse.

And yet God, to whom all hearts are open all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, can cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,

so that we might perfectly love God and worthily magnify God’s holy name.

God, who is faithful & just, promises to forgive our sins & cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

God promises to forgive us, renew us, and lead us,

so that we might delight in God’s will and walk in God’s ways to the glory of God’s holy name.

And all of that is certainly a gift.

To be human is a gift – and a curse.

Probably all Christians believe that Jesus was a human being.

But from the earliest days of Christianity what it means for Jesus to be human has been hotly debated.

The first disciples who lived with Jesus, were very aware of his humanity.

They saw him laugh and cry. They saw him when he was elated and when he was despairing.

They saw him when he was bone-tired and weary

and they saw him when he was well rested and filled with boundless energy.

They saw him extend himself to minister to others

with a compassion and patience that seemed superhuman at times,

and they saw him run away and retreat from everyone in a desperate need to be alone.

Paul, on the other hand, never knew the earthly Jesus.

He only met the crucified risen, and ascended Christ in a vision.

And so for Paul, Jesus was the perfect human, the one who never sinned,

never gave in to temptation, never made the most minuscule mistake.

The disciples and Paul saw Jesus in 2 very different ways.

The gospels and the writings of Paul present him in 2 very different ways.

The disciples and the gospels present Jesus as 100% human –

by which I mean that Jesus experienced both the gift and the curse of being human.

Paul and his letters, on the other hand, present Jesus as being 50% human –

by which I mean that Jesus experienced only the gift of being human, of being perfect & sinless,

and not the curse of being human and knowing fear or uncertainty or guilt or shame.

Most Christians will tell you that Jesus was both fully God & fully human at one & the same time,

but Christians disagree on what that means.

Lutherans teach that Jesus was not 50% human and 50% divine,

but rather 100% human and 100% divine.

Now let me be clear here: I’m not saying that one belief is right and the other is wrong.

Both beliefs are represented in the Bible and both are in the Bible for a reason –

because some people need to believe in a Jesus who was perfect and without sin

and who knew only the gift of being human,

and some people need to believe in a Jesus who actually experienced what it means to sin and fail and fall short

and who actually experienced shame and guilt and grace and growth –

who knew both the gift and the curse of being human.

And this belief that Jesus was 100% human is, for me, one of the gifts that Lutheran theology has to offer.

The more conservative, fundamentalist denominations believe in Paul's theory of atonement,
which demands that Jesus be a perfect human being

in order for him to be the perfect sacrifice to atone for human sin.

And there are certainly Lutherans who believe that as well.

But if the Lutheran position is that we believe that Jesus was 100% human,
then that means that Jesus knew both the gift and the curse of being human,
and today's gospel is a perfect illustration of that.

The Pharisees were very concerned about the rules – especially rules regarding what people ate; Jesus wasn't.
Jesus was concerned with how people loved.

And what he saw were a group of religious people who were more concerned about the rules than people,
more concerned about judging and loving,

and more concerned about the preservation of their own belief system
than the original goal of that belief system which was light and life and love.

And so Jesus rightly called them on it, saying,

“Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person,
but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”

His shot hit the mark & the Pharisees were offended & his disciples tell him that now the Pharisees are upset.
Jesus tells his disciples to ignore them, because their blindness will lead to their own destruction.

But Peter still doesn't get it, so Jesus reiterates

that focusing on what people eat is focusing on a purely physical thing.

What people should focus on is whether they are speaking and acting in love.

Then Jesus, who, after hearing his cousin John had been beheaded, had wanted to get away to grieve,
and who had instead spent an incredibly long day healing people, an evening feeding thousands,
and then a night rescuing his disciples from a storm at sea, reacts like a 100% human being.

Jesus was still reeling from the news of his cousins beheading. He needed time alone to grieve.

And instead, he has been performing miracles day and night.

He is physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually spent. He needs to rest and recover.

And to do that he needs to get away. He needs a break from ministry.

He knows that. And his disciples know it too.

And so he takes the disciples and heads for the beach in a place where no one will know him.

They get to the beach, to a place where they're sure no one will know him, and what happens?

A Canaanite woman recognizes him and starts shouting for his help – to heal her daughter.

Jesus, 100% human, ignores her.

But she keeps shouting, and the disciples know that her shouts are giving away Jesus' identity.

“Send her away!” they advise Jesus.

Jesus, who has been operating with the understanding

that he has been sent to save only the Jews, says he has no intention of helping her,

But she comes and kneels before him, begging his help.

Jesus repeats what he's always been taught regarding the Canaanites,

those remaining indigenous people who had not deserved the land
and who had been conquered by the far more deserving people of Israel,

“It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

After all that's how the Jews saw the Canaanites, and Jesus was a Jew.

And then this woman from an indigenous tribe,

with the immense emotional strength and the incredible mental agility

that oppressed people so often develop in order to survive, says,

“Yes, Lord, yet even the puppies eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

And that's when the lightbulb goes on in Jesus' mind!
He realizes in an instant that he has been operating as a 100% human being,
limited by his upbringing & experience,
and speaking and acting in a way that was far more similar to that of the Pharisees
than to the way of love he had been advocating.
He had accused the Pharisees of judging rather than loving & now he was doing the same thing.
He had pointed his finger at the Pharisees, and now three fingers were pointing back at him.
In an instant, his mind and heart and spirit are transformed
as God acts in Jesus through that Canaanite woman!

Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."
And her daughter was healed instantly.

For me, this is one of the most powerful stories in scripture
for it tells me that Jesus understands both the gift and the curse of being human.
It tells me that Jesus who is 100% divine also knows what it means to be 100% human.
It tells me that Jesus knows the gift of being born in human form in the image of God.
It tells me that Jesus knows what it means to have our thinking limited
by what we've been taught, in ways of which we are most of the time unaware.
It tells me that Jesus knows what it means to fail and fall short
of the expectations of God and of other people and of ourselves.
And it tells me that Jesus knows the joy of experiencing the grace that makes room for growth.
It tells me that Jesus knows the excitement of having God show up
and enlighten our minds and enlarge our hearts and expand our spirits.
It tells me that Jesus is really and truly the way
from where we have been to where we are to where we're going,
the way through one limit, one fence, one divide after another,
the way from excluding to including,
the way from judging to accepting to inviting to welcoming to loving.

The power in this story is seeing how God continually worked in Jesus' life
to prepare him, support him, and encourage him,
because that allows me to see how God can continually work in my life
to prepare me, and support me, and encourage me.

The power in the story is seeing how Jesus allowed God to continue to grow & transform him
so that God's purpose and plan for his life might be fulfilled,
because that allows me to understand that if I allow God to continue to grow & transform me,
then God's purpose and plan for my life will also be fulfilled.

To be human is both gift and curse.

We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

But just as God broke the bonds of Jesus' limiting thoughts, so can God break ours.

And because Jesus was willing to follow God, even to giving his life,

God raised him from the dead, destroying the power of sin and death for all who believe.

To be human is gift and curse –

but in the end, the curse is lifted, the bond of sin is broken, the power of death destroyed,
and all that remains is gift.

May you know the gift of life that underlies, outmaneuvers, and outlasts every curse.

May you know the excitement of having God show up

and enlighten your mind and enlarge your heart and expand your spirit.

And may you know the grace that makes room for growth. Amen