

## Fully Human

For as long as I can remember I have believed that Jesus is the Son of God. I'll admit that as a child I thought of God as an old man, even older than my grandfather. And, to be honest, I thought of God as white. It was quite a while before I figured out that gender and race are *not* attributes of God; they are human qualities we attribute to God. It didn't help that behind the pulpit in my childhood church there was a painting of a very white Jesus by the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps that explains why few families of color showed up even though the neighborhood was largely African-American.

I learned in Sunday School that Jesus taught us what God is like. I was well into adulthood before I realized that Jesus also taught us what it means to be fully human, the kind of human beings God intends us to be. I thought of that again when I read today's Gospel. It illustrates a variety of ways in which we can fall short of our God-given humanity.

The passage begins with a very resolute Jesus. Even though he knew his end was coming, he set his face toward Jerusalem, the most dangerous place for him to be. To get there he had to travel through Samaria. Because the Samaritans believed that their own mountain was more holy than Jerusalem, they shunned Jesus. What a human way to react! If you doubt that, just put it into modern terms. Jesus entered a gathering of Republicans (or Democrats), but they did not receive him because he was a Democrat (or a Republican). Humans still reject one another.

Sure enough, as soon as Jesus was rebuffed by the Samaritans, James and John offered to destroy the village. We see the modern equivalent every day in political ads and talk shows. Jesus would rebuke us just as he rebuked James and John. Like them, we haven't yet figured out the way of love. St. Paul basically says the same thing when he describes what he calls the desires of the flesh. Instead, he says, we should rather be led by the Spirit.

In the Gospel passage we are introduced to three would-be followers of Jesus. The first invited himself into the group even though he couldn't deliver what he promised. Jesus told him, you have no idea what you're getting into. This is a lot harder than you think. The second person received a command to follow Jesus. He demurred, wanting first to bury his father. Jesus' response may seem harsh, but notice that he still commissioned the man to proclaim the kingdom. He was to follow the message if not the person of Jesus. The third man also offered to follow, but conditionally. Jesus made it clear that once one decides to follow him, as our communion hymn will say, there's "no turnin' back."

Taken together, these stories show us our human failings. More positively, they also tell us how to live as disciples of Jesus. Recently I wrote about the "two natures" of Christ, the divine and human, that are present in him "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." Jesus Christ was neither a swirling mix of divine and human natures nor like two boards glued together. Neither his humanity nor his divinity were altered in any way. That's why I say that in Jesus we get both the clearest picture of who God is, as well as a picture of what it means to be fully human – without judgment, without vengeance, without conditions.

Being human is hard work. We know we don't measure up. In the church, at least, we should freely admit that. Our lives continually miss the mark. Yet here we also know that when we repent we will be forgiven and challenged to do better.

I'm glad I no longer have my childhood ideas about God. Each of us needs to keep studying and growing. One gift of childhood stays with me, however. I still thank God for faith in Jesus Christ, who each day shows me how to live.

[Pentecost 3: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62. The four "withouts" describing the union of the divine and human natures in the person of Jesus Christ can be found on page 864 of *The Book of Common Prayer*.]