

Pentecost 2, Proper 4
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Full Humanity

My High School biology teacher (may he rest in peace) was a really neat guy. His classroom was the coolest in the whole school. He had horrific-looking stuffed animals from all over Ecuador hanging at dangerous angles from the walls. He had aquariums full of nasty green water growing all kinds of interesting things. He had a plastic human skeleton hanging in a glass box. His classes were always interesting and engaging. He had us digging through the green sludgy water for critters we could only see through microscopes. I won a prize once for being the first to find an amoeba. He would patiently offer a test over and over to failing students in an effort to get them to master the material.

You all have heard of the teacher's pet, well, he was the student's pet. Every year each class chose a teacher as a faculty sponsor. The choices were made by seniority, which meant the Seniors always got Mr. Landers. He was so transparently authentic, real, and deeply human that students just wanted to be around him.

Mr. Landers told us something that I have not forgotten in all these years. He was talking about how emotions can evoke changes in the body. He told about being so angry one time that he literally pulled a tree of about four inches in diameter up by the roots. What the human being in capable of is usually well beyond what we normally see or expect.

I think Jesus is teaching us that in today's Gospel lesson. The lesson consists of two stories told back-to-back that between them build a picture of what it means to be human. In the first one, hungry disciples pluck heads of grain in a wheat field as a snack. I know what that's like. Wheat is king in Whitman County, and there are always heads of grain at hand in September. You pluck the heads, rub them between your palm and your thumb to take the chaff off, and then if you chew them long enough, they grind and mold into a soft kind of edible chewing gum! But for the Pharisees, that constituted harvesting. Harvesting is work. It was the Sabbath Day. You're not supposed to work on the Sabbath. If Jesus allows his followers to flaunt the law of God, how can Jesus be a true teacher of godliness? The Pharisees see it and get upset.

Jesus' reply is telling. He cites a situation in I Samuel when the sanctity of the very Tabernacle was technically violated to give food to hungry soldiers, with no punishment recorded in Scripture. Here again, hungry people need food, even if it's on the Sabbath. "The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

"Son of Man" is used in several ways in both Old and New Testaments. It can be a generic term—any human, or as in this case, a kind of archetypical human. If Adam and Eve lost their full humanity in the Garden, and alienated themselves from it and one another, then Jesus is the new Adam who shows us that full humanity again. This humanity knows that the forms of worship are never an end in themselves. Their purpose

is to bring about a profound embracing of the fullness of our own humanity as we see it expressed in Jesus. All "rules" about worship must be so measured.

Now, that doesn't mean we throw all the rules out because we now own the sabbath and can do as we determine best. Jesus was fully human; we only partly so. We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit working in and through an only partly human Church, listening always to people about where the Spirit might be blowing, and ready to change directions—in community, in dialog, and all from a place rooted in all the wisdom of the ages of the church, its scriptures, and the dutiful employment of our own minds.

The second story fleshes out the end goal of all that discerning that the Church should always be doing. In the synagogue, a man with a withered hand walks in. I can just see the Pharisees. “Aha! Test case. Let's see if he will continue to trample on the commandments by healing this man. We know he can't resist a good healing!”

They are right. Knowing that he could as easily do this the next day and not poke a stick in the eye of the Pharisees, (indeed, in another place they implore him, “You have 6 days on which to heal, for the sake of the Law, don't do it on the Sabbath!”) He names the elephant in the living room. “Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath, or not; to take life or give it? And in answer, the man is healed.

That's the measure against which we should always be discerning our action as a church. Does it give life or take it? Another way of saying that is, does it follow Christ's example of self-giving love or does it feed our egos instead? Does it prop up the unbalanced power structures of our society, or does it work for justice and peace among all people? In summary, does it move us toward full authentic humanity or away from it?

"Humankind cannot stand very much reality." Wrote T.S. Eliot in his poem "Burnt Norton," part of "The Four Quartets. We're too used to our watered down, incomplete, conflicted kind of humanity we live with day-to-day, but, if Mr. Landers pulling up a tree says anything, it's that humanity is capable of much more than we think. What would our living be like if we were more fully human? Maybe withered hands would be restored.

Where is OUR humanity withered? Wherever our egos put ourselves before or behind others rather than alongside them, underestimating our capacities, or overestimating our importance; wherever our ethnocentric pride moves us to marginalize another people rather than learn to live alongside one another in justice and peace, expecting people of another culture to behave like we do, value what we do and assume the same truths we assume, and pushing them out of places of power if they don't, we display our withered hand.

Perhaps we wither most poignantly when we default to rules rather than dare to look and see the humanity of the people involved. We say things like. "People should follow the law!" Of course, nobody should be above the law. I believe that wholeheartedly, even if this line is usually used by those who wrote them. So what about the people who act as if

they are above the law and get away with it? What if the law is unfair to those who didn't have a say in writing them? Then our emerging humanity urges us to struggle through lawful means to change the law, even as we seek to protect those unfairly affected.

We say, "We don't do things that way." Maybe we don't, and there is probably nothing wrong with the ways we have been doing things, unless, of course, we have been unwittingly pushing some people aside. Then our emerging humanity urges us to look at how we are doing things and explore all the possibilities of doing things in new ways that build community rather than tear it down.

As one of my own church members told me many years ago in deep south Texas about the inclusion of Hispanics in some of the church's activities (In a place where 90% of the population IS Hispanic,) "They're just not up to our level yet." (And I thought, "Yeah, after 150 years, they're still not "up to our level yet?" What's wrong with this picture?) It might be tempting to try to "bring them up to our level," but that's rather arrogant, frankly. Better to sit down around the table and talk together about what would "level" the playing field.

I have said several times that we are in something of an experiment in intercultural communication, a school for building equitable relationships. In an effort to work on that, your Vestry and the Bishop's Committee of Resurrección have established a joint task force of 4 people, 2 from each body, to explore what it might be like to move into a future where the two congregations become one church of multiple ethnicities rather than two congregations where one pays the other one rent.

They are to recruit another 2 from each congregation and explore options, suggest parameters, maybe sketch out some tentative plans, and then report back to their empowering bodies. The team of eight will want to hear from all of you, no matter what your feelings are, so that all voices are heard. I urge you to engage fully and genuinely the opportunity arises.

Let us not forget also that the world we live in outside these walls is full of withered hands, expressions of our incomplete humanity. If we are on a journey into our own full humanity, following the path of Jesus, will we decide we'd rather not risk the status quo to help, or will we decide to foster life instead?