

A sermon delivered by  
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*"He's only human"*

The Church of the Transfiguration  
1 East 29<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY  
Sunday, February 15, 2009  
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

[2 Kings 5:1-15ab](#)  
[1 Corinthians 9:24-27](#)  
[Mark 1:40-45](#)  
[Psalm 42 or 42:1-7](#)

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### **A Study in Contrasts: Captain Sullenberger and A-Rod**

I don't usually pick up the free Metro Newspaper in the morning, but this past Tuesday's cover caught my eye. The headline read "A day of contrasts: NYC's best and worst." Beneath were two pictures. One of Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, with "HERO" emboldened above him; the other was of Alex "A-Rod" Rodriguez, with the word "LIAR" above. The brief article went on to explain how "Sully," as he is called, was given the keys to the city for his heroic deed of successfully landing Flight 1549 on the Hudson River and saving all 155 lives on board; whereas A-Rod lied to millions of fans about steroid use. What particularly caught my eye was the last line of the article which said, "Last night the Yankees issued a statement of support for the star, saying he was *only human*." That caught my attention because I have not heard anyone say the same thing about Captain Sullenberger. In fact, I heard just the opposite. Do you remember what the media labeled his ordeal? They called it "The Miracle of Flight 1549."

The interesting contrast in these two stories, for me, is how the hero's humanity is diminished and his death-defying feat is chalked up to divine intervention, while A-Rod's antics are considered "only human." Why weren't the pilot's actions considered *only human*?

Recently I heard someone give a brief devotional talk on the so-called Miracle of Flight 1549. He described the overwhelming odds that the pilot had to overcome to land this flight, and how had the temperature been one degree higher or lower or had the weight of the aircraft been one pound heavier then he surely would have failed. He went on to give thanks to God for putting all these details into place and gently, in the palm of His hand, guiding this plane to safety. While I too am grateful to God for the safe landing of that plane, I take objection to this notion that God intervened to make it happen.

St. Augustine taught us that, created in the image of God we have been endowed with memory, reason, and skill. In his view, these are our God-given natural human qualities that enable us to do the likes of Sully *and* A-Rod. A classic Anglican principle, dating

back to the proto-Anglican theologian Richard Hooker, is that humankind does not have to be denigrated in order for God to be glorified.<sup>1</sup> To accredit the safe landing of Flight 1549 to divine intervention is to denigrate the memory, reason, and skill of the human pilot, and therefore subtract from the glory of God, in whose image he was created. In other words, it is okay to say, “Wow! That man’s skill was amazing and he really did a great job!” That glorifies God and serves to inspire us to work hard to fulfill our human potential.

### **Gnosticism**

The dualistic belief that humanity is bad and God is good has deep roots. One aspect of Gnosticism is a belief that matter is bad and spirit is good. Christian theology has battled with that notion since the beginning and, as in the case of the two figures I have lifted up this morning, we can see that American culture is still influenced by it.

### **Sacramentality**

Christianity’s answer to this problem is in the enfleshed God, Jesus Christ, who is both spirit and matter all in one. It is from the fully divine and fully human Christ that many of our Anglican traditions stem. For example, sacramentality is the notion that God’s presence is in and communicated through material things. We celebrate this chiefly in Baptism and Eucharist. God’s grace will be communicated to you today through the very ordinary elements of bread and wine. Another example of sacramentality is in the liturgy. In the early centuries when the liturgy was developing, Gnosticism was prevalent and the church defiantly decided it would ceremoniously process bread, wine, and other offerings (money, for instance) from the back of the nave all the way to the high altar in the front. You will see it later this morning. It is almost as if we raise our fist rebelliously saying, “We will show you that there is little distinction between the ordinary and the sacred, matter and spirit, human and divine.” Another example of the way we Anglicans take the incarnation and weave it into our lives is through an oxymoron called *holy worldliness*. Many theologies and philosophies advocate for a view of holiness that calls for separation from the world. We Anglicans, however, call for holiness that is deeply engaged in the world. This enables us to embrace both the sacred and secular elements in our culture, recognizing that the two are not always that different.

So the incarnation poses some very interesting problems not only to Gnosticism, but also to Judaism, which is how this all connects to the readings for today.

### **Leprosy**

In both the OT and Gospel lessons we heard stories about lepers. Leprosy was a catch-all term for a variety of skin disorders which were no doubt problematic physical maladies. The real problem with leprosy, though, was that it made you ritually impure according to Judaism. You might remember that the custom of the day for lepers was to announce themselves by yelling, “Unclean, unclean” as they approached others. The ritually impure were cast out of the community – cut off from their family and friends – until they underwent the appropriate cleansing rituals and were restored to God and community.

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<sup>1</sup> A.M. Allchin, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barton, 1988) 9.

The reason leprosy made you ritually impure is because your skin was no longer whole. In fact, it would oftentimes have two or more colors to it. This mixture is what made you unclean. It is similar to kosher laws regulating the eating of certain creatures. For example, it is not permitted to eat shrimp because they are both sea and land creatures. It is the mixing of two or more elements which causes the problem, in part.

### **Holiness Redefined as Wholeness**

It is my best guess that these purity laws are somehow related to the monotheistic essence of Judaism, the belief that God is one. The key text of Judaism, the Shema, says, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God! The LORD is One!” Holiness is understood as oneness.

In Christianity, however, holiness is understood as wholeness. It is in the integration of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ that holiness is redefined. It is not purity that makes one holy, but integration. Jesus touches the leper, which would make him ritually impure, but by those standards he is already impure because he is both God and human. Jesus moves away from an either/or to a both/and orientation. In other words, the question is not, is the leper pure or impure? But given that the leper is both pure and impure, what does that make him? The answer for Jesus is human.

### **Paradigms of Purity and Compassion**

Theologian Marcus Borg takes an interesting approach on this matter when he argues that, “The elites of [Jesus’] day read Scripture in accordance with the paradigm of holiness as purity. Jesus read it in accordance with a paradigm of compassion.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus sees the whole person when he looks at the leper, not just his disease. A paradigm of compassion would advise us to view others as more than just a steroid user, for example, or more than just a homeless person. We all know that there is more to us than meets the eye. The golden rule encourages us to view others as we would want them to view us – as whole beings with multifaceted lives that sometimes result in deception, sometimes in heroic deeds, but most days somewhere in between.

### **Light and Shadow Sides of Personality**

20<sup>th</sup> century psychologist Carl Jung is well known for his theory that integrates both the light and shadow sides of human personality. The metaphor is apt because you can’t have a shadow without light. The shadow side is that half of our personality that we don’t like about ourselves. In theological terms, it might be that part of us that is sinful. Jung argued that the key to psychological health is in awareness, acceptance, and integration of our shadow side with our light side. Both/and, not either/or. He argued that to be unaware of one’s shadow side usually resulted in seeing your shadow in others. This leads to judgment, whereas acknowledgment of our shadow sides may lead to compassion for ourselves and others. For instance, if I am unable or unwilling to see my own hatred for another person, then I am likely to view that person as hateful. I see in them what I don’t want to see in me. If I am able and willing to see it in me then when I see it in them I am more likely to have compassion.

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995) 58.

The shadow side is seen the *Star Wars* character Anakin, who later becomes Darth Vader.<sup>3</sup> He was almost denied entrance into the school of the Jedi's because of their concern over his fear. He was, after all, a child slave and had much to be afraid of, despite his great talent and obvious presence of the Force. His fear eventually turned to anger, but he struggled to acknowledge those parts of himself. He failed to integrate them into his personality and finally turned to the dark side and became Darth Vader. One wonders what would have become of young Anakin if he had only sought the help of a professional counselor or spiritual director.

We are about to finish up the season after the Epiphany, which focuses on the great light of Christ that has come into the world. We will enter the season of Lent in a week and a half from today, which focuses on our mortality and sinfulness, the shadow side of that great light. I am grateful that the Church year affords us the opportunity to intentionally examine the fullness of our humanity, both our light and our darkness. It reminds us that we have the potential to be a hero and a liar, a saint and a sinner.

### **Conclusion**

May we relish in the extraordinary acts of ordinary people like Captain Sullenberger, and may we look with compassion on our and others' failings, and may God help us to know that in both are signs that we are *only human*.

In the name of the Incarnate One – fully human and fully divine – Jesus Christ, Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anakin\\_Skywalker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anakin_Skywalker)