

A sermon delivered by
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“What does it mean to be human?”

The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
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The Second Sunday of Lent

[Genesis 22:1-14](#)
[Romans 8:31-39](#)
[Mark 8:31-38](#)
[Psalm 16 or 16:5-11](#)

What does it mean to be human? If you ever heard any of my sermons then you know this is a question that I like to explore. And it is particularly relevant in Lent when we are invited to reflect on our mortality. This point was punctuated on Ash Wednesday when someone rubbed ashes on your forehead and said, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

City of Angels

A movie that helps me explore this theme is *City of Angels*, starring Nicholas Cage and Meg Ryan, which came out in 1998. Cage’s character is an Angel named Seth. As human beings face death his vocation is to see them through the transition from this life to the next. He and his fellow seraphs are fond of asking the human what his or her favorite part of life was – a question that revealed the angels’ inability to experience it for themselves.

On one mission Seth encounters a surgeon named Maggie for whom he begins to have feelings – a new experience. The feelings are mutual but Maggie will not allow herself to fall in love with him since he is immortal and therefore impervious to injury. Seth encounters one of Maggie’s patients who used to be an angel but chose to become human. Intrigued, Seth explores this possibility and begins to weigh the pros and cons of angelic life versus human life. He decides to become human in order to pursue a relationship with Maggie and experience human love firsthand.

Seth finds his way to the hospital, Maggie’s work place – traveling for the first time without his wings – and learns that Maggie has gone to her uncle's mountain cabin for a break. With little money and a lot of naiveté, he can't pay for the journey and ends up having his boots stolen by a gang of youth, but eventually manages to get to where she is and appears, cold and soaked from the rain, at her doorstep. Seeing a wound on his lips and breath coming from his mouth in the cold air, Maggie realizes that he has become human for her love. She allows herself to fall in love with him.

Later, as she rides her bike to the store she is tragically hit by a truck. Seth hears the screeching tires, feels that Maggie is in danger, and runs to her side. She tells Seth that

she sees an angel. He pleads with her to look away, but she can't. Before she dies she tells Seth that when the angel asks her what her favorite part of life was she will say it was him.

As he grieves his loss – also a new experience – Seth is visited by one of his former cherub colleagues and they discuss his predicament. He is asked if he regrets his decision to become human and, by the end of the movie, it is clear that he does not. Seth learned that to be human means to experience not only the highs of new love, but also the depths of loss.

Back to the original question, what does it mean to be human? There are many answers, but two in particular that are relevant today. To be human means to love. To be human also means to suffer. And we all know these two are connected.

Jesus & Peter

As Jesus foretold his suffering, Peter became agitated. So much so that he rebuked Jesus. In Peter's mind, and in the mind of many others, Jesus was to be a victor, not a victim. Jesus was to be the Messiah who would swoop in and restore Israel to its rightful place of glory.

Jesus was to be the hero of this drama, and Peter did not want to hear that Jesus would suffer and die. Jesus calls Peter Satan, or adversary, because he knew that Peter did not understand God's plan yet. His ignorance was causing him to work against it. Then Jesus says a very interesting thing: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." What an interesting statement given that Jesus is human and he is talking about very human things: suffering and death. Yet he calls them divine. What are the divine things he is referring to and what are the human things? The line is blurry.

Human Things

First, the human: Peter's rebuke reveals his pride and the will to power, two ways of understanding sin according to 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. That is not to say that humanity equals sin, but none of us can deny that sin is a deep aspect of our common humanity. Peter is stuck on this notion of Jesus as the mighty warrior, the one who will use might to overcome their oppressors. That is a very human notion indeed. The powerless feel dehumanized and long for a powerful One to save them. The problem with that logic is that the oppressed become the oppressors. We see this happen all the time.

Parker Palmer, a Quaker writer and educator, was recently interviewed by Bill Moyers on PBS.¹ He made an interesting and profound observation about the way the U.S. responded after 9/11. He said that as a nation we failed to connect our suffering to the world's suffering. We acted as if we were the only nation that had experienced terrorist's attacks and instead of connecting to the world's suffering, we punched back. The attacked became attackers.

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/02202009/profile2.html>

Divine Things

Now to the divine things: Christ is not interested in displaying God's power through might; rather, he chooses to display it through something far more powerful: suffering love. Imagine God, with all of God's power plus the might of the archangels – Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel – at his disposal. Can you imagine the fury that God could unleash in a split second? Think of all the tsunamis, earthquakes, tornadoes, nuclear explosions that you have ever read about or seen on TV. All of that wouldn't compare to the might of God. That is what Peter had in mind.

More powerful than that, however, is a love so deep that God, impervious to injury, would become vulnerable enough to feel human pain. The incarnation is a picture of a God that chooses to feel what every human being at some point will feel: pain. But there is a difference between pain and suffering. Pain is a bodily sensation that tells us something is wrong and needs to be fixed. Suffering is a spiritual sensation that occurs when we can't make meaning of our pain. Jesus will experience this when on the cross he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In that moment, Jesus will suffer because he believes God is no longer with him and he can't make meaning of it. It is a crucial moment for each of us because it is precisely that event which makes it possible for God, through Jesus Christ, to know what human suffering is.

Our redemption is found in God's compassion, God's suffering with us. That is why Jesus rebukes Peter, because he fails to understand that Jesus' destiny is to redeem the world precisely through his suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus has to do a very human thing in order to fulfill his divine destiny.

Elie Weisel's *Night*

Elie Weisel, a survivor of Auschwitz, tells an interesting story in his book *Night*:

The SS hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" a man behind me asked. As the boy, after a long time, was still in agony on the rope, I heard the man cry again, "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice within me answer, "Here he is – he is hanging here on this gallows..."²

God's power is rarely found displays of great might. Rather, God's power is found in his love and solidarity with the victim. Just as redemption is found in God's suffering with us, so is our ministry. Our call to ministry is to suffer with others just as God suffers with us. It has often been said that we are God's hands and feet in the world; likewise, we are God's heart and feelings in the world. We are all called to cultivate compassion in our lives in order to suffer with others in a way that is redemptive.

² Elie Weisel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 70-71 quoted in Dorothy Soelle, *Suffering* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975), 145.

With any conversation about suffering it is important to make the distinction between redemptive suffering and senseless suffering. Indeed it is true that love and suffering are inextricably related, but that is in no way meant to condone abuses of any kind. Theology like this has been used for centuries to bless the dehumanization of others. I am referring to women, minorities, and other that have been oppressed by the notion that they should suffer as a way of showing their love. Abuse is senseless suffering. Redemptive suffering is more like what a woman goes through when she gives birth. It can be a painful event, but it can also result in new life and new love. Redemptive suffering always results in the enhumanization of others through love, not the dehumanization of others through abuse of power.

CONCLUSION

In this Lenten season I hope you will consider both divine and human things. The line between the two is always blurred because of the incarnation of Christ, the One who is both fully God and fully human. May our humanity be strengthened by our willingness to love one another even to the point of suffering.