



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

THE SOUL CELL

Philippians 2:5-8; Romans 6:5-11

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What do Anthony Fauci, your next-door neighbor, Jesus of Nazareth, and you all have in common? You are all human. The Gospel of John declares, "The Word became flesh." God became human. I think, in our own minds, we predominantly think about Jesus' divinity, but the gospels go to great lengths to demonstrate his humanity.

He gets tired and hungry.

He weeps at the death of his friend.

He becomes angry.

He needs time to be alone,
and time with others.

He fears death.

In this season of Easter, we celebrate Jesus' victory over the grave; that, because of his divine nature, he had the power to redeem humanity. But Jesus becoming human, as Paul describes in Philippians, can mean so much more to us because of the times we find ourselves in.

The challenge of living our humanity is perhaps only going to become harder in the months to come. But Jesus' example can give us strength, and focus, and direction:

Jesus' faith in God and faith in his disciples
shows us how to have faith;

Jesus' love for God and love for others shows
us how to love;

Jesus' hope for God's victory shows us how to
have hope that God will overcome.

Faith

God has no need of faith. God knows all and can do all things. God is absolutely at zero risk to contract the virus.

But the incarnation emptied Christ of such omnipotence. So, the human Jesus needed to trust God, to trust that God had Jesus' best interests in

mind, that God was listening when he prayed, and that God would provide for his needs.

Jesus' human faith in God shows us how to be faithful. In the wilderness, the devil tempted him to cheat the system by turning stones into bread. Jesus replied, "One does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." He showed us to have faith that God will provide for us – that we do not to cheat the system, we don't need to hoard, to take more than our share – and, in this way, everyone will have enough.

Our ability to navigate this time as a species will require not only faith in God but faith in each other as well.

I fully believe we are up to it.

I believe people are showing more trust in each other, not less. Just don't believe the news! I am not saying they are making things up, but that the weight of the stories reported do not reflect what I know to be happening. People are doing the right thing in this town, in this state, and in this country. People all over the world are showing that when things get hard, we can get better. But we are not going to get it perfect.

We are being tested. Unlike Jesus, when his humanity was tested, when he was tired, hungry, or angry he did not turn on others.

We are on the edge of a knife and this balance could tip very quickly. The smallest of things might trigger it. An example of greed, a random act of fear, but we must not let it.

We trust our leaders
to do what they believe is best.
But they won't always get it right.
Nobody does
and that includes me
and it includes you.

But there is something amazing about you that perhaps you don't realize.

Paul tells us that our old self – our sinful self – was nailed to the cross with Christ and then buried down in the ground (*"Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed"*). Building upon this reality, Paul tells us a new self, a new me, and a new you was raised up with him (*"if we have been united in a death like his, we will certainly be united in a resurrection like his"*).

You were raised up into the perfection that you were meant to be.

It is something like cell biology. Just as the structure of the whole human organism through our DNA resides in every single cell so, too, does that ultimate human being reside wholly and truly in you and in me. Sometimes certain traits are suppressed, as in a cell, sometimes it becomes cancerous but, nevertheless, the real you is still present there, and this perfection is present in you ...and in everyone. That is the promise Paul gives us in Romans.

We don't always act out our true selves, but it is a treacherous lie to say that any human creature is evil.

As Barth radically claimed in between World Wars, when the worst of humanity was rearing its head,

*Nietzsche's saying that man is something to be overcome is an impudent lie
...We have to regard all human beings even the most oddest, most infamous or wretched, from the point of view that on the basis of the eternal decision of God Jesus Christ is also their brother.*

And so, we can have faith in each other, at this time, even when we don't always live up to that faith. Because we are believing in that part within each other, that "soul cell" that is, in truth, this incredible person, because Jesus' life and death made them that way.

Jesus showed us how this faith in one another brings out the best within each of us. It awakens the part of the soul cell that is the true self. Remember, he entrusted a great deal to his disciples, the glorious message of the Gospel, even when it seemed as if they were never going to be able to get it right.

Would you have ever handed this mission to his disciples? No way! But Jesus did.

He depended upon them
and, because of that trust,
they turned the corner on faith
and proved incredibly,
amazingly,
up to the impossible task
of getting this movement
past the end of Jesus' earthly ministry.
They did it!

And they did it because they saw something in the human Christ that they had not seen in anyone else.

Love

When Matthew tells us, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd," that Greek word for compassion literally means to be moved in your inward parts, in other words, to have your guts torn out.

Jesus cared so deeply for those in need, his love for them was so powerfully felt, that seeing them helpless and suffering, tore his guts apart. Human love is painful.

It is hard because it will always end in loss. The more we love the more we lose. But Jesus showed us that to be human is to accept this reality and love anyway.

That's what we need to bring to these days.

We have all felt, at one time or another, like our guts are being torn apart. The stories of people breathing their last breath away from the presence of their loved ones is heart breaking. The marriages

delayed, the businesses collapsing, the poor and people of color getting the worst of it . . . again. It is all so painful. But Jesus showed us not to shy away from it. We need to feel it all out of respect – out of love – for everyone.

The disciples became what Jesus knew them to be, because they knew Jesus truly loved them. They knew it in their hearts and *that love* gave them the strength to become their amazing selves. Love gave them the power to see their humanity elevated to its most noble form.

Hope

Finally, Jesus showed us hope. That even though love is painful and sometimes the loss is suffocating, there is light and life ahead of us.

Jesus climbed on that cross because he had hope that God's power would bring light from darkness, life from death, victory from loss, and joy through sorrow. Jesus showed us that human hope, when centered on God, is not wishful thinking for a better day but a firm and clear confidence in the power and love of the Lord God of heaven and earth.

Jesus could endure the trials of the present because he was so utterly clear eyed about the future God would bring.

That is our same hope in this time. A clear-eyed faith in God and in our fellow human beings. The hardships we endure now are nothing compared to the glory which shall be revealed to us. By his power, we shall overcome. One day, we will embrace each other – without fear – with the fullness of love that God has placed in our souls.

Jesus the human showed us the way. He showed us the profound beauty that is human. And it is a sublime thing.