

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 31, 2010
Lessons: I Kings 17:7-14 and Mark 7:32-36

HUMAN TOUCH

Few actions could be more poignantly human than that of the widow who shares with Elijah the last measure of food she has for herself and her son. Because Elijah is a prophet, a man of God, she gives her life's final acknowledgment to God, though she holds no more hope. "As the LORD your God lives," she swears, "I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Quietly, she follows her routine for sustaining and sharing life, believing this time will be her last. There is nothing else to do but live until they die, share life until their time is spent. Elijah asks her to include him and, therefore, God in her last small measure of life. And so she does.

As modern human beings, we have developed great faith in systems. The scientific method of investigation has empowered us to exercise control previously unimaginable over outcomes in our endeavors, greatly reducing the role of chance and the folly of superstition. By following science's systematic approach to information gathering and problem solving, we deal with conditions as they actually exist and apply knowledge rather than superstition to our efforts. As a minister and a believer in the redemptive truth of God come to us and for us in Jesus of Nazareth, I do not speak against the scientific method of investigating our world and seeking to solve problems; I do not call for a return to haphazard approaches to getting things done or to superstition and prejudice which empower fear over reason. Even if I could, I would not turn back the calendar to the pre-scientific days of untested methods and magical prescriptions for security or success.

But as a society, we who have been modern are now called postmodern because our faith in the systems we have developed has not only faltered as we have witnessed their limitations but turned cynical as we have suffered under their corruptions. We have seen truly scientific thinking replaced by checklist management where the motive has been, not to solve problems through open inquiry, but to silence questions and enforce top-down control. We now know that our best-made systems remain always imperfect, and we know further that we can develop no system that people cannot game for their own advantage over others, often to the detriment of the very people the system is supposed to help, for whom it is meant to make life better.

Slowly and with great resistance, we are learning that “one size fits all” is a falsehood that invariably hurts many people. While systematic thinking has helped us all in many ways, absolutizing any system that governs people’s lives and manages their opportunities harms more and more people until finally the system must be broken because it has become a tyrant. In theological terms, absolutizing a system and requiring everyone to fit into it, whether it fits them or not, is a modern form of idolatry. Absolutizing anything in our world is idolatrous, and when we do it, we soon find ourselves pressed into the service of the very system that was supposed to serve us. The truth about people is that one size fits rather few because we are very complex creatures, and God has created us with an individuality, a uniqueness of each person, that frustrates the systematizers who try to force control by demanding conformity and ignoring people’s differences. Then the dictum of those who would manage and control our lives becomes, “Be normal or perish.” Meet the standards we set or be left behind.

And what is normal? Here’s how it works much of the time. We describe an ideal, then call it the norm. The one size, one type, one way we choose to regard as right we make the standard. For our high school yearbook, we voted as a class on the usual categories of distinction, plus one called “typical American seniors.” Typical, not outstanding. When I saw the winners, both friends of mine, I had to smile, even at the age of seventeen. Joe was the all-district center on our Central Jersey Group Four champion football team, and Mary was co-captain of the cheerleaders. Typical? If they were typical, what were the rest of us? Now, someone who knows teenagers and appreciates them might say that, underneath the honors and the popularity, Joe and Mary were more typical than the rest of us realized, to which I would reply, “Yes, they were, and uniquely so.”

There’s an oxymoron for us or, perhaps, a paradox. We human beings are very much alike in many ways, which is good because otherwise we would not understand each other at all or be able to empathize with each other’s feelings. But though each of us is typical in many ways, each is uniquely so. God has made us very much alike but each distinct and irreplaceable, because God loves each as a person – a born-to-become sister or brother of Jesus and so a daughter or son of God.

This is the day of our Annual Meeting as a church, and the business of that meeting will be conducted in Presbyterian fashion, which is that of a representative democracy older than the United States. But the strength of the church lies not just in the beauty or fairness of its system but in its knowledge that God loves each of us and respects our individuality, freedom, and responsibility as persons.

A church is not a program, not even a mission. Because the churches are declining in numbers, no longer attracting crowds of new people, we have church growth movements

and schemes, and the word of this moment in history is “mission.” Well, it’s true and basic to Christianity that Jesus Christ calls us to be his church because God loves the world and wills its redemption. We are not called to stand apart from the communities and societies into which God places us. We are here to serve, to minister, to empathize with and care about people who do not know the love of God. But mission is not all the church is about. What we call the “Great Commission” – “Go, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you . . .” – that commission comes under what Jesus names the two great commandments: *Love the Lord your God with every capacity and capability you have, and love your neighbor as yourself.* Yes, the church has a mission in and to the world, but in essence the church is community of faith, hope, and love, and without those essential forces of life, a mission soon becomes either a weak program or a dangerous crusade.

What the churches do best is offer the human touch. We all live under systems that tend to humiliate and dehumanize us in various ways and to different degrees. Some seem tolerable, others not so. Here in the community of faith, we are not given norms by which to label people “acceptable” or “unacceptable”; we are not given standards for judgment to impose control and demand conformity. We are called to be more family than system, more community than institution. We do not weed out the less efficient for some program. Here attitude matters more than ability. Here the two copper coins given for God by the poor widow are greater than the large sums given by the wealthy from their excess. Here those who fail the test of the norm are respected as persons of equal worth.

I chose our reading from the Gospel of Mark because for me it serves as a parable and symbol of the personal, human way in which God has entered our life and history. Jesus treats the deaf man with a speech impediment with physical touch. Now be careful. What we see is not a procedure for cure and certainly not a magic ritual of healing. We will not cure the deaf by putting our fingers into their ears, and few in our sterile society would welcome the symbolic transfer of saliva. Such actions are not the norm for Jesus. With him what gives life and wholeness is God’s grace which cannot be controlled by any ritual or means, and what completes healing from our side is faith not method. But for some reason, the extra human touch matters this time for this man. For me, it is symbolic of our calling to share humanity – to be the living body of Christ – in a world that dehumanizes people. The churches are always tempted to try to appear as divine as possible. To be faithful to Jesus, we need to be as human as possible so people can find him through us. The church is a widow gathering a few sticks to bake some bread with her small supply of grain and oil – a widow whose time is always running out unless God gives the gift of life, but who shares what she has left with a stranger. Amen.