

BEING HUMAN

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17
The Baptism of the Lord
January 12, 2014
All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

One of the more challenging things I have heard in recent years was a lecture by a Dutch theologian called Hans Reinders¹ talking about what it means to be human and how he did not think it had to do ultimately with our capacity to think or feel or respond to life in any way. He became interested in mental illness and physical incapacity following the birth of his own daughter who was mentally and physically challenged. It was another woman however who really got him thinking. He met her, --let's call her Sabine--, in a Dutch care home. Sabine was about thirty years old at that time as I recall. She had no short term memory or anything resembling muscle memory, but was otherwise physically 'well'. She had to be taught anew every day the most simple tasks like eating and swallowing, both of which she could do. She had no speech, no apparent affective response to others. She had brain function according to tests but appeared vacant to those around her. She was not in a coma. She could move her limbs to help when others dressed her. She was awake and functionally alive but she

¹ See Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift Of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology and Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2008)

enjoyed nothing like a human capacity to respond, remember, think, or do much of what we generally imagine differentiates us as human beings.

But here's the thing: every day the caregivers in that group home got Sabine out of bed. They washed her. They bathed her. They dressed her. They brushed her hair. They sat her in her chair and helped her eat. And then they would put Sabine near the nurse's station where many people would see her. And as they passed they would say "Hello Sabine. How are you today?" "Hello Sabine, you look pretty today." "Isn't it a beautiful day, Sabine?" What became clear to our theologian friend was that Sabine was very much a part of the community around her. She was treated with dignity, -- touched, cared for, recognized, perhaps dismissed by some, maybe experienced as burdensome on occasion,-- but clearly a presence who would be missed if she were not there. Challenging conclusion: what makes us human is community as much or more than any inherent capacity or ability we might have. I'm sure I'm over-simplifying Professor Reinders' case but it seems that what makes us human is to be treated with some dignity and to be known in some way in the midst of other people.

Sabine was clearly a human being. She was clearly alive by every medical measure. She was cared for and perhaps loved in some sense by others. And yet, I still

think that there is something “less than” about Sabine. I don’t want to go all the way and say that our capacity to respond to others in an outward and visible way is not important to our humanity. But I really get that it is in community that we become who we are, that we are shaped by norms and practices and values. It is this truth that makes family such a basic community, whatever the shape of that family.

Jesus was a man shaped profoundly by his community. There have been and are many interesting theories as to why Jesus offered himself to be baptized by John and what it might have meant to him. The fact is that we don’t really know what baptism meant to Jesus. Best bet was that it had to do with *preparation* for the coming Reign of God; --the very same Rulership that Jesus announced had become present in the world with and in him. It was also to “fulfill all righteousness” or in some way participate in the practices of the community that make up the expression of covenant relationship or right relationship with God.

So remember Sabine. Wasn’t she helped to participate in the norms and practices of her community? She was clean and dressed and fed. She was up during the day and went to bed at night, probably with her teeth brushed. Aren’t these very simple basic things part and parcel of what allow her to be part of the community that

responds to her and engages with her? And would it be the same if she was left on the floor with dirty hair and dirty clothes? No, of course not. But still others would have complained about her treatment and advocated for her and in the process affirmed their own humanity even as they affirmed hers.

Jesus' baptism was part and parcel of his being in the community that shaped him, taught him what was important and, in a sense, made him human just as much as his flesh and blood birth.

This *matters*. This matters, because it informs us. It shapes our own practice as we remember what really matters so that we may be remembered or 'put back together', restored and renewed when we worship.

In this day and age, for many of us, community itself has become a spiritual practice. At the very least we can say that community is not something we can assume. The days are gone for most of us who worship here when we could assume that the people we see at school and on our sports teams and in the stores and at the local theater and so on, are the same people we will see at church. Real community is no longer a 'given' if it ever was. There are all kinds of people trying to tell us that we are

part of a community: the radio listening community, the Atlanta community, and so on. Magazines and periodicals want me to think that I am buying a relationship when I subscribe, where in fact I am only buying 12 monthly issues. Real community, (Greek *Koinonia*) the kind in which you know others and are known by others, the idealized meaning of community to which we aspire in the church, --that kind of community is something that is both a gift, --a gift of baptism—and a *practice* or *commitment*. I have a friend, (another parish, another time) who was engaged with a church, raised his children there. He enjoyed the children's programs and some good connections for him while he participated in that community. But he never really 'connected' in some important way. He was known superficially through his work and his position in the community and his relationship to his children. But when things got really challenging in his life and his marriage was falling apart and his professional life was undergoing great change at the same time, no one from his church—not one person-- called to see how he was doing or what was going on. He told me this story long after the fact and I realized that could happen here.

In a large city, community is something we have to find. And deep community, the kind in which we have real friends when things in life go really wrong, --that is something we have to look for, invest in and nurture,. It is a spiritual practice. Coming to

a parish picnic can be a great place to meet others and it is a kind of expression of community, but it is only really fun if there are some people there with whom you have developed some degree of friendship and even intimacy somewhere else and over time: a small group, a Bible study, a retreat, a women's chapter, maybe a committee or serious time with a refugee family. You get the idea. Community these days is a spiritual practice, --a choice that makes what we do in worship an expression and reinforcement of something that is already happening in our lives, rather than something we do from time to time with others on a Sunday.

The first gift we mark for any and all of us in baptism is community, --special people with whom we practice remembering what really matters so that we are remembered, put back together, recognized and connected. This can sound like a simple message, but it is as much about our deep humanity and our deepest needs as was Jesus' baptism for him. If any of us want to be the people we were created to be, then we need to find ways to connect with others, to practice community that we might be free. Sabine had that gift in a way. I would like life to be much more than that. How about you?

I offer this

in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

AMEN