

“Respecting the Dignity of Every Human Being”

I was reminded this week of the first time I ever came to Chicago. I was in seminary and I had come out for a symposium on science and spirituality put on by McCormick seminary and the University of Chicago. I was presenting a paper on mental illness and the image of God - and how the church needed to affirm this beautiful doctrine of our faith, that every person is inherently a bearer of God's own likeness, in order to offer a measure of healing and wholeness to those suffering from psychiatric disorders. The conference, and my paper presentation had gone well during the day, and I had decided that I didn't want to pay fifty dollars for some conference dinner with a bunch of people I didn't know, so I thought I would explore Chicago and find something to eat.

Now little did I know that there really aren't a lot of restaurant choices in the immediate walking vicinity of that location, so before long I was just walking down random residential streets in search of something to eat. I started walking down one street and noticed a clearly mentally-disturbed homeless man, looking in the windows of all the cars parked along the street. I started to do what most people would, I went to cross to the other side of the street when he saw me, and yelled out in a loud voice, "Hey man, give me some money, I need to buy some food." I tried to ignore him, but he yelled again, "Hey, you, give me some money or I'm going break this car window." I didn't want him to damage anybody's car, so I said, "look, I don't have any cash (which was true), but I'm looking for a sandwich too. Let's find a place and I'll buy you dinner."

As he came up to me I could see that he had been on the streets for a long time. He was weathered, not just his clothes but his skin and his hair. But I couldn't look him in the eyes, not because I was physically afraid of him, but because he was desperate and needy. Those are two of the worst things you can say about a person in our culture right - I would never hire him, he just so desperate, or, we used to be friends but she was so needy I just cut it off. He had been treated as less than fully human for too long and it had created a deep hole in his soul, a lacking that you could feel. I didn't mind giving him some money, but I was at a low point in my own life, and I feared that if I looked him in the eyes that somehow his desperate neediness would take more from me than I had to give. So we just walked on, and found this little sandwich stand, with nowhere inside to sit, so we ordered, and I told him to get extra food, and they were clearly upset I had brought this person there.

We got our food and then went to sit on the curb to eat. And for the first time it occurred to me, and I said, "what's your name?" He looked up and we finally made eye contact - he had soft blue eyes that didn't fit his weathered appearance, and he said, "Robert, what's yours?" And that started us talking. He told me a long story full of terrible circumstances, poor choices and worse luck. There were themes of racism, isolation, and a discourse on how it's helpful sometimes for people to think you're a little crazy if you live on the street. And then he asked me, "can I get some other things I need?" His earlier demand had softened into a request. His desperation had become more like a hope. I said sure, and we went into CVS. A manager type followed us around to make sure he didn't steal anything. At one point he picked up a package of white athletic socks, and with a look like a kid on Christmas he said, "can I buy this whole package?" It was late fall and I had learned why it was called the windy city as we walked down

the wind-tunnel streets, and I saw that his shoes had holes in them and I understood and told him yes. He was so proud walking up to the counter because this time he would be waited on and his stuff bagged properly.

When we came out of CVS, he asked me where I was headed, and I told him I was staying at McCormick Seminary. He said, "Oh, I like it there. They let me sit in the chapel and talk to Jesus." And then, without any sense of irony he said, "I'll walk you back. You shouldn't be out here by yourself." I would have been lost, but he gave me the gift of his presence on the way back, and we shook hands and left like to human beings having an interaction.

In today's gospel story, Jesus is confronted by the needy and the desperate. The passage says Jairus falls to Jesus' feet and begs him, needing him to heal his daughter, and the afflicted woman risks everything in a desperate attempt to steal a touch of his cloak and be made whole again. Jesus is not threatened by this desperate neediness as though it will take too much from him. What he is threatened by is the idea that these two people might be dehumanized, that after an encounter with him the full potential of their humanity might be left lacking. For the God who came into the world to redeem and restore humanity, that would be the ultimate failure.

And so it wasn't enough that the woman was healed and stopped bleeding. Jesus needed to stop everyone, search her out, and in the midst of a crowd honor the faith that made her a remarkable human being, so that they would all recognize her as someone that the creator of the universe would care about, someone who the Christ would look in the eye and say, they won't record your name but Daughter, you matter to me. And while he was doing that, the mourners came and said, "don't bother the teacher anymore; your daughter is dead." But Jesus needed Jairus to understand, she is not a lost cause, I will not write you off. You are worth my time and energy, because your love is beautiful, and right and profound and I will save your daughter.

And at the end of it all, Jesus instructs them to tell no one, which is ironic because Mark records the story to tell everyone. I think what Jesus is doing there is saying, I don't need you to sing my praises as a miracle worker, I need you to tell the story of redeemed humanity - because that is the work I came for and it is important. The Christ did not come into the world to make himself greater - he was already God. He came into the world to restore the dignity of humanity. Not just to recognize the dignity of every human being, but to respond to it, to restore it where it was lacking, and to reaffirm it always. Robert had a story and it was worth listening to. The hemorrhagic woman had a faith and it was worth lauding. Jairus had a love and it was worth rescuing. Those are things that Jesus cared about far more than his own glory.

Some of you know that the general convention of the whole Episcopal Church is going on this week, and there has been a lot of talk there about the fact that we don't talk about Jesus enough and that is why we are shrinking as a denomination. But I think our problem is that we don't live like Jesus enough. That we don't carry on Jesus' work of redeeming humanity enough. Jesus will be fully God whether we tell his story or not. Jesus doesn't need anything from me. But there are people perishing because their humanity isn't realized, because their dignity isn't fully recognized, and that is a danger to the gospel. It's not that we need to care about Jesus more, it's that we need to care about the things that Jesus cared about more. That is why our baptismal vows, the initiation of every Christian, ends with this question, "and will you respect the dignity of every human being?" because at the end of the day, our witness to the world, our proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ will rise and fall on whether we can embody Christ in that action. Let our response be, "We will, with God's help." Amen.