

During my years as the pastor at Salem Church in Toledo, Council members took turns leading devotions at their monthly meetings, sharing a song, reading a Scripture, making a few comments, or leading a prayer. Of two decades of such devotions, I still remember Eleanor's. She chose three stories from the gospels which assured her of Jesus' humanity. First, when Jesus was 12 and ran away from home—or, more technically, away from his family while they were visiting the temple in Jerusalem. Second, when he entered the temple as an adult, saw the moneychangers using the temple for their own purposes, shouted, "My father's house shall be called a house of prayer," and overturned their tables. And third, when his friend Lazarus died, and he wept.

Most of the time, when we read about Jesus in the gospels, we encounter some detail that points to his divinity. When we read, for example, that, after being tempted in the wilderness he was ministered to by angels, we're not likely to think of him as human. When we read that he cast out an unclean spirit or cleansed someone from leprosy or healed someone who was paralyzed, we see him as more divine than human. When we read that he stilled a storm or walked on water, we are more inclined to think of his divinity than his humanity. We can't relate so well to those stories of Jesus' divinity.

But when we read stories in which Jesus rebels or ignores his family or expresses hunger or anger or sadness, we get glimpses, not of his divinity, but of his humanity. Eleanor, in her council devotions, uncovered three of these accounts. As an adolescent, Jesus leaves his family to follow his own path. Maybe you did that in your adolescence, or maybe you're doing that right now. When Jesus enters the temple to find that his Father's house is being treated as a marketplace rather than God's dwelling place, Jesus not only gets angry; he also expresses his anger boldly, even violently. Perhaps you, too, express your anger at mistreatment or injustice. When Jesus hears of his friend Lazarus' death, he weeps. Maybe you do that, too, when a family member dies, or your spouse loses their job, or a friend betrays you. When we read these stories, we experience Jesus as human.

One of my favorite hymns paints a picture of this human Jesus. "Once in Royal David's City" is a Christmas hymn, though not a very familiar one. After a couple of verses about Jesus' coming down from heaven to be born in a stable, the song continues:

For he is our childhood's pattern,	Day by day like us he grew.
He was little, weak, and helpless,	Tears and smiles like us he knew.
And he bears with us our sadness.	And rejoices in our gladness.

When I sing this verse, I am reminded of Jesus' humanity, that he grew, just as I did, that he was little, and weak, and helpless, just as I was—and sometimes still am. I am comforted to know that he knew tears and smiles, just as you and I do, and that, in coming to live among us, he came to know our sadness and our gladness. I'm grateful for this Christmas song and for Eleanor's list, because they help me to know that Jesus experienced the struggles that I do, that he knows what it's like to be happy or sad or confused or mad, that he knows what it is to be human, because he was human.

Today's gospel offers us another account of Jesus' humanity; I'd like to add it to Eleanor's list! In this story, we meet a Jesus who has something to learn, not a Jesus who has everything to teach. We see Jesus as he is challenged, and then converted, rather than as someone who challenges and converts

others, which is usually what we see him doing. We see Jesus as his heart is opened from a narrow focus on his kinsfolk, his relatives, the people who are like him, to a broadening capacity to include others who are different from him, even Gentiles, those who are not Jews. I take comfort in meeting this Jesus who doesn't have it all together at first; in seeing him learn how to accept those outside his tribe; in watching him grow into gracious acceptance of all of God's people, not just his own people; in seeing him move from a stance of partiality toward his own people to a stance of impartiality toward all of God's people. In this story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, I get another glimpse of Jesus' humanity.

We know very little about the woman in this story. First, we learn that she has a little daughter with an unclean spirit. Some translations say she's possessed by a demon. Today we might say she has a mental illness or a brain disease. Second, we learn that she is Syrophenician; that is to say, she is from a region just north of Israel, which we would now identify as Lebanon or Syria; her ethnicity places her outside of Israel; she is not a Jew, but a Gentile. To Jesus, she is therefore a foreigner—outside his tribe, not his kin. His initial response to her request for healing for her daughter is therefore denial; his first reaction is to show partiality, to treat her differently than he would treat a Jew who came to him for healing, since he has been taught to avoid contact with Gentiles. He responds with words that we can only hear as rude and dismissive: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Referring to the people of Israel, the Jewish people, as "children"—and to the Gentiles as "dogs," Jesus offends the woman by referring to her as "a dog." Desperate for healing for her daughter, the woman, taking no slight at Jesus' insult, instead answers boldly, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." For the sake of her daughter, the woman risks even further insult.

At this point, Jesus, receiving the woman's challenge, is converted. He grows and stretches. Rather than excluding the woman and her daughter, he includes them. He grants her request, even though she is a Gentile who does not keep Jewish law. Showing no partiality, he moves outside his tribe, outside his kinsfolk, outside his comfort zone to heal the woman's daughter.

I think this healing story belongs on Eleanor's list, because Jesus seems more human when we see him growing and stretching. I'm grateful to know that he didn't start where he ended up, because then I don't have to end up where I start. When I choose partiality, when I want to limit my work for God to my tribe, to those who are like me, I am reminded by this story that, as Jesus was stretched, I, too, must be stretched, to grow, not to exclude others, but to include them, to treat them with impartiality.

When I meet this human Jesus, I find him hanging around those whom today's Psalm labels as "those whose help is the God of Jacob": the oppressed, the hungry, the captive, the blind, those who are bowed down, the stranger, the orphan, the widow. Jesus gathers with them, and when I hang around with him, I meet them! And then I learn what his name "Emmanuel" means. God in Jesus is God-with-us, God with you, God with me, God with those whom we would choose to exclude. He gathers with us—and with all who need him. He gathers us, all of us who need him, and he is, for us, for all of us, Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Maybe you need Emmanuel today, if you are unemployed or underemployed, living with disability or mental illness or addiction, or grieving the loss of a loved one. Jesus chooses to be with all who are in need, with the neighbor whose wife died, the co-worker diagnosed with cancer, the child abused by a parent. And Jesus chooses to be with you, whether you are a kid having a really hard time in school or a middle schooler who didn't make the team, whether you are a rebellious adolescent or an angry champion for justice. No matter what is happening in your very human life, Jesus is there with

you. He chooses to hang around with you. He reveals himself to you as Emmanuel, God-with-us. He gathers you to himself, with all those others in need. Jesus is there, here, with you.

Jesus is with you because he knows your lot. He knows what it is to be hungry or homeless. He knows how it feels to be angry or lonely or depressed. He knows what it's like to try to find your way in the world as a teenager or a 'tween, or to lose your job or your ability to drive. He knows what it is to do the hard work of stretching and growing. He knows what it is to suffer the burdens of human life, from birth until death. And so he comes to you in your struggles, your hope, your joy; in challenge, in triumph, in times of celebration; and whenever you have more to learn. He gathers you with all those others in need, and he invites you to join them at his table where all are welcome, to share the meal by which all are fed.

Will you notice him, right there, with you, as you feel confused or afraid? Will you hear him calling you to stretch, to grow, to trust, to move beyond your comfort zone? Will you remember that Jesus was not only divine but also human, and that his humanity is what allows him to be here, with you, with me, with all those in need, whatever we are experiencing, now and always? AMEN