

“Son of What?”

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One of my favorite commentators on NPR is a guy named Ian Shoales. Perhaps the only thing stranger than his views on any particular topic is the style in which he delivers them. He talks faster than any person I ever heard and with a kind of increasingly frenetic energy. It's as if he has wandered in off the street and discovered a vacant studio with an open microphone, and knows that he has only a few minutes to expound his odd opinions before someone realizes a mad man is loose in the building and on the air. All of his commentaries ended with the words “I've gotta go”, as if he can hear Security running down the hall in his direction.

I sort of feel like that this morning.

It has been I think five or six years since I have preached a sermon. There are reasons for this, but trying to explain them would constitute another entirely different sermon than the one I have prepared for this morning. When Lorie came to WPMF, apparently someone told her that Sheldon was known to preach on occasion. So at some point, perhaps slightly desperate to fill out a summer schedule, she asked if I would be interested in preaching a sermon. “Not yet”, I told her. Apparently she took this as something of a challenge, because every few months she would ask again, to which I gave the same response: “not yet.” Finally, a month or so ago, after looking at this year's worship guide for Lent, I called Lorie and said, “OK, I think I'm ready.” Whether you all are ready for me is a different matter.

I am not a seminary graduate. I lack the training required to put together sermons on a regular basis. When I preach, I am generally speaking from my own life and experience. This means, as a rule, I only preach when I feel like I have something to say. The theme for Lent this year, “Becoming Human”, sort of touched a nerve.

I will say this much about my absence from the pulpit. It has to do, in part, with a rather tedious process of deconstructing, and reconstructing my relationship with God and my theological frame of reference. It's been going on for a while.

I started with God the Father around 2006. The issue there was *anthropomorphic patriarchy*; i.e., getting rid of the angry male with the white beard lodged in my head since early childhood. But that's another sermon.

This morning I want to share some of what emerged when I got around to Jesus. By this time I was a tired, jaded middle aged man. The relatively straight forward Cold War world I had grown up in had now devolved into the Post 9-11 morass of ever escalating tensions and violence. Much of which was fueled by people on all sides of the theocratic divide who, like me, took their religion seriously. And I found myself asking, is it really possible that George Bush and I believe in the same the same Jesus? How can I reconcile gentle Jesus meek-and-mild with a God-Man who demands swift and decisive action against all enemies foreign and domestic? And how can I advocate the conversion of all people to Christianity while my country was bombing the crap out

of a fairly significant slice of the global demographic? How can I be a follower of Jesus without making things worse?

The root of this question, I decided, was a case of conflicted Christology, which is just a seminary word for what we believe about Christ. Like many of you – I was raised into a “High Christology.” Think “King Jesus – Second Person of the Holy Trinity.” The Jesus of my early years was, more or less, God the Father’s Junior Partner. Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One who came to save my sins; died on the cross, rose from the dead and was due back any day at the head of a really angry army of angels. So if that’s “high”, what’s “low?” Think of the flip side of Jesus as God.

For those of us raised in the Christian faith the dual nature of Christ is a baseline teaching.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father

As a child I was taught that Jesus was “wholly God and wholly human.” But I can’t remember anyone helping me understand the inherent cognitive dissonance contained in that phrase. “Jesus was just like you and me, only perfect.” Can’t you just hear your Youth Pastor’s voice in your head? I will be 57 years old this month, and I can now say with a fairly high level of confidence, “Dude, that is NOTHING like me.” When I thought about it at all, it was something like this: God put on a man-suit and stopped by the planet. He preached some sermons, did some miracles and then died in a carefully orchestrated process that fulfilled a grand, pre-ordained scheme of Atonement. *We worshiped a Jesus who was “up there.”*

The dual nature of Christ – God in Man – is probably the central paradox of the Christian faith. And we deal with it mostly by not dealing with it.

When it came time for me to sort out the Post 9-11 Jesus, I was helped immeasurably by my old friend Walter Wink. Some of you probably know him for his exhaustive, three volume work on “*The Principalities and the Powers.*” Wink’s study of the spiritual dimensions of cultural, religious and governmental institutions can be summed up in what he calls the “Domination System”:

“That world-encompassing system characterized by unjust economic relationships, oppressive political relations, patriarchal gender relations, prejudiced racial or ethnic relations, hierarchal power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them: in short “civilization.”

In Wink’s view, the Domination System has been with us since the fall of man. The Babylonia Empire, the Roman Empire, the Crusades, Nazi Germany, the Segregated South. Different names, movements, institutions, governments, all different incarnations of the same thing. It is

the continually Present Darkness that Jesus came to confront with the message of God's Kingdom; something radically new that was to actively work over and against the Domination System.

The visible manifestation of God's Kingdom in this world is supposed to be the Church. The question is, how is it that the Church, time and again, has ended up co-opted and intertwined back into the Domination System? Why do we so often get it wrong? And more importantly, where is Jesus in all this?

In his book, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of Man*, Wink makes his case for Christology gone wrong. Specifically, he takes on the problems that arise when "high Christology" falls out of balance with "low Christology."

The central focus of Wink's book is the very odd title that Jesus used in referring to himself: the Son of Man. He used it more times than any other title, and yet we have next to nothing in liturgy, ritual or hymnody about the Son of Man. (I challenged Tim to find a hymn about the Son of Man for this morning. I think I won the bet). The meaning of this self-designation is probably the hottest theological debate you've never heard about. Ever wonder what DMins and PhDs argue about huddled in dark allies in the middle of the night? This is probably at the top of the list.

The term, son of man in colloquial Hebrew and Aramaic, *ben adam* or *bar enosh*, were generally accepted as an allusion for "man" or "human being", in the same linguistic manner that "son of the quiver" was another term for arrow, or "son of Nazareth" was used to refer to someone from that town. But the term also appears in the apocalyptic writings of the Old Testament, most notably in the visions described by Ezekiel that was read this morning. In his vision of God on the sapphire throne, Ezekiel struggles to convey what he has seen. It is clearly God. It is surrounded by wild and unimaginable phenomena, but essentially the best Ezekiel can do is describe the divine figure as "something like a man, or a human being." And when God speaks, he addresses Ezekiel as "son of man."

Most scholars agree that Jesus was probably taking this phrase from Ezekiel and Daniel, but, at least according to the writers of the Gospels, he adds a very odd twist: the Greek term used in each Gospel is *ho huios tou anthropou*. Literally, the son of the man. It appears nowhere else except in the canonical and related literature of that period. The double definite article was considered to clumsy to leave as it was, so it came into more modern translations "son of man." But what we need to understand is that in everyday discourse Jesus was referring to himself as "The Human Being", or as Wink argues. "The Son of the Human One."

Wink takes a scholars view of the "son of the man" passages across all the Gospels, examining language, contextual analysis, historical background and such, trying to understand why Jesus used this strange title. If you want the full story, you'll have to read the book for yourself, all 350 pages of it, including notes and exhaustive bibliographies. I have read it twice, very slowly. I won't say I understand all of it, nor do I ultimately agree with everything Wink concludes. But here is the short version: If we don't truly embrace that Jesus was a human (or perhaps more pointedly - a homo sapien) we miss the opportunity to partake in what he offered; the chance to

become more like the Human Being, the one that he referred to as “Papa.” We need to consider what it means for Jesus to Incarnate God, as opposed to simply being God.

Jesus came to announce, and to embody something entirely new, God’s kingdom breaking into a world under domination. He spoke with power and he demonstrated power. But also knew the hearts and minds of those who were embracing him. They were looking for a Messiah and that was a very loaded term. The Jews of that era wanted release from the oppression of Rome. They wanted the same thing people always want; a vibrant, powerful leader onto whom they can project all their fears and longings. What Jesus brought was not violent overthrow. It was *liberation through transformation*. As the Son of the Man, Jesus always points back to the one who sent him, and reminds his listeners that the power and authority that he incarnated is now available to everyone. This brings two aspects of “low Christology” into sharp focus:

First: We need to step back from the total divinization of Jesus and allow him to be a true human being, complete with frailties and shortcomings. We need to re-read his story without the high Christology glasses. This includes:

- The thoughtless teenager who scares his parents to death by running off for three days.
- The son of Mary and Joseph who – at least according to his neighbors – put on airs and was not above disrespecting his mother and blowing off his family.
- The party guy who perhaps really did like his wine a little too much.
- The scandalous, unmarried man who enjoyed the company of many women and was not shy about intimately sharing himself with them.
- The social malcontent, who was intentionally rude to authority figures, threw tantrums in the Temple and killed a fig bush for no better reason than there was no fruit available when he wanted it.
- The frustrated teacher who rebuked, berated and despaired at the inability of his own disciples to understand what it was he was trying to tell them.

In short, we need to hold in tension the very imperfect man with the one who nevertheless wholly incarnates the God who sent him.

Second: We need to always remember that everything that Jesus taught, everything he did, everything he became is accessible to us. As Paul said, Jesus is the Elder Son, the first of many. We have access to the same power and authority that he did. We can heal, we can teach, we can forgive. All of the supernatural manifestations he demonstrated were not given simply as proof of his divinity, but as examples of what is available to each one of us through God, the Human Being. When the disciples wake him up in the midst of the storm, it isn’t their lack of faith that annoys Jesus. It is the fact that they didn’t take care of matter themselves. Jesus opened the door to nothing less than the transformation of imperfect homo sapiens into something like the One who is truly human. And that transformation is still in process. We do not yet know what we are to become.

So how can we rebalance High and Low Christology? Here are a few modest suggestions. (And this is where I start looking for the hook)

- Let the Christians of the world, (particularly those in the west) stop thinking of Jesus as our proprietary brand. We have built a culture of evangelism based on one verse: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” What that has become is, “No one comes to Jesus except through our membership process.” Let us acknowledge that the days of hacking through the underbrush with machete in one hand and Bible in the other, bringing the Word to the ignorant heathen are pretty much over. We have the internet and global cell phone service. The world knows what Christians believe. They are now waiting for us to live up to our various creeds and confessions. As St. Francis used to say, “Preach the Gospel always. When necessary, use words.”
- Let Jesus go. Stop treating him as intellectual property. We don’t own him. Amazing things happen when he speaks for himself. Jesus remains a compelling and attractive figure, even when you strip away our religious trappings. If you were to create a short list of the most influential Christians of the 20th Century – defining “Christian” as one who incarnates God as Jesus did – I would strongly argue that at least one Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, would have to be included. The Great Soul never joined the club. But his life has become an eternal testimony to the power of God’s Kingdom confronting the Domination System. Let us not be afraid of letting the rest of the world discover who Jesus is on their own terms.

I gotta go!