

## **“Pondering the Divine-Human Paradox”**

**Luke 2:41–52**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

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There is an old story about a time ethics professor Henlee Barnette was travelling with a colleague to a conference. The colleague said, “Henlee, don’t you think paradox is one of the most fascinating aspects of Christian faith?” Dr. Barnette replied, “Yes... and no.”

It was a predictable response, especially from an ethics professor, and he was one of the finest, but the claim is still valid. Christian faith is filled with paradoxes, beginning with the great truth of incarnation we celebrate in the Christmas season, the claim that God takes on human form, and thus Jesus is both human and divine.

This is a time when the church often reflects on this sacred truth, “ponders” it, to use a verb which describes Mary’s response to it. I initially used the phrase “Making Sense of the Divine-Human Paradox” for a sermon title but realized that would be false advertising. Making sense of it is beyond us. All we can do is ponder the sacred mystery.

Normally, how the church does this is through lofty philosophical language, and often in the context of John’s prologue which talks about the Word becoming flesh and living among us, revealing grace and truth. In this realm, I love Scottish theologian Donald M. Baillie’s insight — God was in Christ, he argues in a book with this title. I like that...

But even the best philosophical and theological reflections on this paradox fall short. It is a mystery, we will never fully understand it, but the 30,000-foot view is lacking. We need something more specific, more down to earth, like the story we have read today about the Holy Family going to Jerusalem for Passover when Jesus is twelve.

For Mary and Joseph, the divine-human paradox is not a lofty theological concept. It is a daily conundrum they must navigate. Here it is a budding adolescent who seems to disobey them like every other adolescent disobeys their parents, but somehow this tweenager is God!

Parenthood is always a challenge, one of the most rewarding of human experiences, but still a challenge. Asked about the challenge of coaching his son in college, Indiana University basketball coach Bobby Knight said, “Coaching my son has given me insight into why in some species, the parents eat their young.” We may never have gone quite that far... but parenthood includes moments for all of us that try our souls. Yet imagine the challenge for Mary and Joseph!

Scripture doesn't tell us anything about Jesus between the birth narratives and this story when he is twelve. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas describes the five-year-old Jesus making birds out of clay on the Sabbath and getting into trouble for doing so, and then cursing a boy who bumps into him, whereupon the boy dies immediately! The young Jesus has to explore his abilities, but how much does he understand about who he is and what power does he have at what age? Luke says he increases in wisdom which means he doesn't know it all yet.

In our story, Jesus wanders off and upsets his parents when they realize he isn't with them. They don't notice his absence for a day, which seems odd, but in this time, numerous extended family members travel together, and Mary and Joseph assume he is with them. Once they realize he is missing, it takes several days to find him.

When they do, in the temple, like most parents in a situation like this, they are filled with a mixture of relief and irritation. They are thankful he is OK, but they are also ready to wring his neck! “Child, why have you treated us like this?” Mary says, “Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” We know how they feel.

What we can't imagine is how they respond to what Jesus says. “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” Do Mary and Joseph say, “Duh, of course, the God-Child would be there!” or do they say, “Watch it with the pious attitude, young man, you're not fully God yet and you might not make it to thirteen if you keep this up!” We don't know how they feel. Luke says they don't understand what Jesus is saying. But eventually Mary treasures all these things in her heart. We don't know about Joseph.

But as we reflect on this part of the story, we have to wonder whether we are seeing more of Jesus' humanity or divinity. Wandering

off and sassing your parents seems very human, but being in God's house seems very pious though also the best excuse ever.

Yet in his book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* Jacob Neusner notes that in Jesus' time, Torah is understood to take precedence over genealogy, so that "the master of Torah gains a new lineage [or new family] (p. 48)." Barbara Brown Taylor notes that while this Jewish understanding never becomes license to abandon family, it does underscore the seriousness of Torah study (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 169).

So, what the young Jesus is doing is not completely out-of-bounds, but his response to his parents seems less tactful than it might be. Is he more human or divine in this story? Perhaps the best answer is — yes!

Scripture does not explain how the human and the divine go together in one person. In fact, while the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are designed to address this question, they don't tell us exactly how. They simply point to the sacred truth with poetry and metaphor, in effect, saying it's too large to be contained by a geometric proof.

But scripture does affirm two things — that Jesus is fully human and that he is fully divine. Those outside the church struggle most with the latter part of this while those inside struggle with the former.

People of other faiths, especially Judaism and Islam, which are monotheistic, struggle with Jesus' divinity. How can you believe in one God and think Jesus is also God, not to mention the Holy Spirit? We call this the Trinity, one God in three persons, but when we try to explain it, we end up confusing ourselves.

There are others who struggle with the concept, those who are curious about spiritual things but do not align with any religious tradition, they struggle because it is not an easy concept to embrace. And to be honest, there are people in the church who wonder, perhaps only quietly to themselves, "Was he really God? He was special, I believe in him and try to follow him, and he had a spark of the divine, but was he God?"

But while many outside the church and some within question Jesus' divinity, those of us in the church struggle even more with his humanity. We say he is fully human, we embrace the general concept,

but when it comes to specific human thoughts and emotions, we waver. Does Jesus really become angry at people selling merchandise in the temple? Does he really cry when his friend Lazarus dies? Does he seriously question his calling in the Garden of Gethsemane?

A scene in Nikos Kazantzakis' book *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was made into a film, points to the one aspect of human identity that troubles the church the most. In a dream sequence on the cross, Jesus wonders what it would be like to live a normal life - to marry, have children, and work a normal job. Most church people have not read Kazantzakis, nor have they seen the film, but they have heard about the scene which includes Jesus' dream about physical intimacy, and they find this objectionable, blasphemous even.

But if Jesus is fully human, like us, he must have such inclinations. And pondering a normal life is not sinful; it's what Jesus does in the Garden. Why do we struggle with this aspect of Jesus' humanity? Because we have a diminished view of sexuality. But we struggle to embrace his humanity in general because we can't come to terms with the idea of God being fully in there if something like us is too.

Yet this is the good news of incarnation, and it is essential to everything else about Christian faith. Only because God takes on human form can God identify with our experience, the joys and the sorrows. Only because God takes on human form does the crucifixion make sense. God killing off one man to save a world is a cheap parlor trick, but a part of God's own self laying down life for all is transformational. Only because God takes on human form does the resurrection shatter the norms. This isn't a one-off occurrence designed to gather a following. It is a universal gift offered by the One who experiences it firsthand.

Somehow Jesus is fully human and fully divine. We can't explain it, but our faith depends on it, we depend on it.

But there may be another implication of incarnation. It is a doctrine that addresses the character of Christ, but it may also have implications for our identity. I am not suggesting we are like Jesus. There is only one of him, he is *monogenes*, to use the biblical word, one of a kind. But might his identity suggest that we have within us at least

some spark of the divine? And might God's willingness to take on human form suggest that we embrace a higher view of our humanity?

Scripture says we are made in the image of God. Some argue that what sets us apart from other living beings is that we have a soul. But in Judeo-Christian thought, in contrast to ancient Greek thought, we don't have a soul, we are a soul, an embodied soul, and every other living creature is as well. What sets us apart is responsibility, the responsibility to care for the earth with God.

It is an aspiration, not a given, a possibility, but we can do more than look after ourselves, our family, our kind, our species. We can reach toward the divine with our care of others and the world, with our capacity for kindness and compassion, for forgiveness and healing.

But God's willingness to take on our form also suggests that there is something good and noble about being human. "I am only human," we often say, and if by this, we mean we have limits, we are right; but if we mean we don't have much potential, we are wrong. We each have the potential for good and evil, for a meaningful existence or an empty journey. John Killinger references a saying he heard as a child. "Two men looked out from prison bars: one saw the mud, the other saw the stars." There are stars out there if we look for them. As someone has said, God doesn't make junk. That includes us.

Writing in this month's issue of *The Christian Century*, Disciples of Christ pastor Lee Hull Moses says she remembers seeing the film "Home Alone" as a child and finding it hilarious (p. 29). It was great to imagine being alone in your home as a child and having complete freedom. But recently she saw the film again, as a mother, and she had a different experience. It was terrifying to imagine what it would be like to be separated from your child and not know if he/she is okay.

In like manner, she suggests, we may read Luke's story at different places in life and have a different take on it. That's true of many biblical stories, especially those that relate to Jesus' identity. There is more than we can hold in our minds. Divinity and humanity all rolled into one little Jewish boy hanging out at the temple, that's a lot to ponder, and it's just the beginning.