

What Does it mean to be Human?
United for the City
August 24, 2013

I want to thank each and everyone here. Your attendance represents a desire to not only improve your own personal life but reinforces the truth you desire to improve the lives of others. We are not a disjointed group of people. We are a collection of men and women. Faith based and non faith based organizations that share a common goal of loving the city and county in which we live. Yet deeper than that. We have a concern for the person. We have a concern for the person who makes up the city. These men, women and children walk our streets. These souls attend schools, patronize businesses, sleep behind stores and fight to provide for their children. These are the lives each of us are involved in and all of us are human.

We are created to be fully involved in this life. Our involvement in this life which is known by a specific time-the twenty first century- and a specific place- Conway, Little Rock, Perryville- is the sum total of experiences that we have with another person. When I see a man or a woman, I am being invited into their life. When I feel their breath, hear the syllables that come off their tongue or see their saturated face of bitter tears, that moment or series of moments is an ordained opportunity to be fully involved in their experience. How do I engage in that experience?

Love. Love is a word. Love is a emotion. Love is a action that compels a seemingly weak person to enter into the suffering of another and serve as the catalyst for freedom. Suffering prevents a person from knowing intimately the freedom of joy. Suffering is the chain around the legs of the emotionally paralyzed who are powerless to stand and leap in the freedom of life. Love compels a man or woman to enter into the dark places of suffering and through a powerful word, compassion and bold action set a

suffering man or woman free. Love, my friends, has us stand at the foot of the grave in tears and compassion boldly declaring suffering will not have the final word. Love, my friends, is the catalyst to serving the whole person

Each man and woman that is here today has been created to enjoy the twofold expression of love that originated outside of time and extends within time. The reason I know love extends beyond time rests in the truth that love became flesh. Love has been seen. Love has been testified this last day and half and love has been proclaimed. The reason I know love extends beyond space and time and broke into our lives is because God, he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Love stood at the foot of my grave with tears and boldness and said, "Live!" Love stood at the foot of your proverbial grave of suffering, bitterness, hate, unforgiveness and every other dehumanizing way of life and said, "Live!" Therefore, if God so loved us in a manner that Christ lovingly entered our suffering and dark places; we also should love one another (1 John 4:11). Our love extends in space and time to one another because we have experienced that same love which came from outside of space and time.

What does it mean to be human then? Since I am and you are a man or woman made in the image of God to be fully involved in the human experience through love; what does this mean?

To be human means to love in words and action (1 John 3:16-18).

I don't want to love simply in word or talk. To the church I must say, our orthodoxy is only as good as our orthopraxy. Yes we wrestle with doctrine. We want to proclaim as accurately as possible the riches of God's grace in Christ. Yet how often do we wrestle with the proper way to love the poor? Have we examined doctrines such as benevolence, compassion, prejudice, widow and orphan care to the same degree as atonement, church planting, election and expositional preaching? To the nonprofits I must say, our policies and procedures are in place so that we are free to appropriately and effectively engage those in need. When the policy and procedure become the focal point of our daily efforts; what then? To those in government, I plead with you to see with your own eyes the impact of your bureaucracy. Data collection sheets, statistics and percentages offer the possibility of increased systems that hinder love and not advance it.

Therefore, words existing alone in the midst of suffering will not alleviate the hunger of Tommy who stands on Harkrider with a sign asking for food. Words alone will not solve the increasing number of part-time workers who are still unable to pay their rent. Words alone will not comfort the woman who has called church after church looking for aid only to be told, "We can't help you." We churches, nonprofits, government and private centers must enter into these places with powerful truth and action. When words of love are accompanied with deeds of love; suffering children find strong foster care. Poor neighborhoods meet new friends who have freely chosen to embrace their plight. When words of love are accompanied with deeds of love, city officials will consider the poor, the middle class and wealthy equally in economic development. When words of love are accompanied with deeds of love, churches fully demonstrate to a watching city the implications of God's love. To be fully human means fully integrating objective truth with loving action.

To be human means we must prophetically identify the hindrances in peoples lives and prophetically speak the solution (Mt. 19:16-23)

Walter Bruggeman stated, "The hope filled language of prophecy in cutting through the royal despair and hopelessness is the language of amazement... the language of amazement is the ultimate energiser." The words that come from our mouths are to create hope in those who are lacking in mind, body, and soul. We speak prophetically when we discern despair and offer hope. We act prophetically when we act with hope and wait with expectation the joy of change.

The rich young man is representative of men, women, children we meet on a daily basis. He understands there is a lack in his life. While his life is characterized by a series of negative actions; "I don't kill, I don't take what does not belong to me, I don't disrespect my family," he understands that he lacks some necessary action to know and possess life. "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"

Christ exhorts this young man, he speaks prophetically into his life by exposing the hindrance, the obstacle that stands in the way of him living in completeness. Christ prophetically identifies that this young man honors his possession more than life. The ability to have temporary purchase power and seemingly shape his temporary life stands as a greater value than a whole and complete life. What is the prophetic solution Christ offers? It is activity that is positive. "If you would be perfect, go, sell and give." If you desire wholeness get up and release what is preventing you from knowing life. If you desire the satisfaction of joy in the present and future, give it away and the reward will be far greater than you have ever imagined.

The work many of you are involved in is difficult. We meet men, women, children on a daily basis who know their lives are lacking yet refuse to

release that very possession-unforgiveness, bitterness, abusive power, laziness, prejudice-which keeps them from “perfection.” Love compels us to prophetically identify that hindrance and offer solutions. Love operates in us to assist men and women to act. Love operates in us to speak prophetically and this awakens the imagination of those who hear and believe it. Humans speaking prophetically in love is that disturbing. But when prophetic love is spoken and that person walks away in sorrow because the perceived comfort of that possession is greater than the unknown of freedom; I hazard to guess you have experienced a similar sorrow. Yet you continue to show up day after day. You continue to hope and believe that what you are saying and the solutions you offer because of your love for others will produce fruit. Which leads me to my second point.

To be human requires us to value the life of an individual higher than the threats against us (Mt 5:43-48)

I want to be known as having a career for humanity. In the city, humanity is made up of friends, brothers, and sisters who have your best interest at heart. They encourage you. They give you a slap on the back and say, “Thank you for being with me.” In the city, humanity is made up of enemies as well. There are men and women among us that critique your work. Make value judgements on your approach and hope you shut your doors.

Christ teaches that to be human and reflect the God who created you requires us to value the life of an individual higher than the threats against us. This is completely antithetical to the laws of the streets and culture. The streets and culture provide a law and philosophy in which human life is disposable, love is directed only to those who hold my skin color, my faith, my economics or my political views. We serve the whole person-our enemy-when the degree of our love is higher than the threats they issue against us.

See, if the life of Jesus involved loving those like himself, none of us would enter the kingdom of God. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners (enemies) Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). When you look at your opposition, you must look beyond the man made barriers and see a soul in the chains of hate. His or her hate towards you is not only prophetically identified but love compels you to be the hand God uses to break your enemy free from those chains as well. Hate has never brought about freedom. Only a love that values a person at the possible expense of your own life will bring about freedom. See when we love our enemies we demonstrate to them in no uncertain terms we desire that he or she would be free from the chains of hate, destructive language and violent actions. A common love has you act for those who bless you. God’s redemptive love has you act on behalf of those who seek your life. Love is that disturbing. Yet even in our efforts to love and value the life of our enemies, we must understand we will have to enter the environment of difficulty.

To be human, we must work in difficult environments to display redemptive love (Lk 6:6-11)

Let me ask you a question? Are there specific cultural practices in your church, nonprofit, or government policies that benefit or harm our neighbor? We must discern the difference between the cultural practices which support the life of an image bearer of God and the practices that do not.

Jesus enters a building similar to this on the Sabbath day. This was the day in which no work was to be done. It was a day of rest and reflection of God’s creative work and provision. In that place was a man with a withered hand and in that place were religious leaders.

We should enter those places where the incomplete person exist. We should be discerning about the individuals and power structures that are reinforcing or creating obstacles to serving the whole person. We must speak prophetically as Jesus asked, “is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” We have to ask the hard questions which challenge both the individual and the practice. We must ask, “Does this practice or law correspond with the higher moral law of loving God and loving one another?”

Second, when you enter into difficult places with oppressive systems and practices, you will be observed. Your reputation precedes you. Jesus was known to heal (demon possessed man, he cleansed a leper, healed a paralyzed man). Your reputation to improve living situations, to stimulate economy, provide better living for foster children; anything that is done to create a new reality in love challenges the status quo. When you discern the problems, when you prophetically ask the tough questions, you will be watched, you will be accused, and you may be demeaned.

But I am so glad that Jesus entered the difficult environment of our human existence to display redemptive love. Jesus entered our difficult existence of sorrow, brokenness, false accusations, orphans, widows, and homelessness. When we read “the word became flesh and dwelt among us,” we read that God has intimately and powerfully participated with humanity. The incarnation of Christ demands that humans engage in the difficulties of peoples lives as a response to this redemptive love which compels us to love our friends and enemies. Love shapes our souls to live powerfully in the midst of watching world.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentleman, as we leave today and scatter to our specific locations and people groups; let us scatter with the reminder we are people who refuse to settle for how things currently are. We are humans who love in deed and truth in the middle of difficult circumstances. I encourage you to prophetically speak truth and prophetically act as a response to love. We know that a full display of what it is to be human is possessing a high value on the sacredness of our neighbor because he and she are image bearers of God. We know what it is to be human because God became flesh and displayed redemptive love. Now we go and we act. This is our calling that we go out into Conway, Faulkner County and Arkansas with. We go out in hope and with the confidence that the love demonstrated to us compels us to love with an unfailing love for the whole person.

Let us pray.