

**“Truly Human” based on Genesis 2:18-24 and Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on October 3, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Last Thursday morning, my son Harrison was telling me some facts about Orcas that he had learned. He loves Wild Kratts, a show on PBS. He asked if I had ever seen an Orca – I told him I saw them at Sea World as a kid, and that I hoped that at some point we would be able to take him there too. His sister Josephine chimed in, ‘My sister saw an Orca in the ocean. Lots of them.’

Now, this frustrates Harrison: because he is often one-upped by Jo’s *‘sisters & brothers.’* We only have these two kids. Yet these sisters and brothers always come up when they have already done whatever it is Harrison says he wants to do. So, Harrison snapped back at her, *‘Is your sister even real?’* Jo yelled back, *‘She is real!’*

Before they could get in a shouting match, I gave Harrison a look to say, don’t argue this, and then we left for school. In the car, he said something I thought was very insightful. He said, *‘I’m sorry I said that Papa. I know Josephine thinks they are real.’* He recognized that for her, all of her ‘sisters and brothers’ are important. We talked about how it is ok for her to have these imaginary friends, and there is no need to stop Jo from telling her many stories.

You see, Harrison has had peers his age all his life – Claire was pregnant when we went to seminary. So, the friends we made there, were couples who had newborns or were expecting, and those who did not yet have had a child but were hopeful to have one soon. So, three years later when we graduated, Harrison had a set of readymade best friends, all within a year of him, and his closest friend is just 19 days younger. After Seminary, the friends we made had kids Harrison’s age. Josephine has never really had her own friends her age. She always gravitates toward Harrison’s friends, even if his friends have had younger siblings.

And so, for the last year or so, as Harrison talks about his friends, old ones and new ones, and Josephine matches Harrison with a stream of consciousness about imaginary siblings, all of whom manage to be and do everything that matters to Harrison. And they do it better.

Now, Jo is in preschool, and she is beginning to make friends, and I can’t help but wonder: How long until she makes a close friend or two, and the sisters and brothers disappear? On Thursday afternoon, she spoke mostly of playing ‘super spy’ with a friend, about whom she said, *‘You know her. She was at that restaurant. She’s from church and Rainbow.’* I’m excited to watch as the imaginary becomes real, and she makes friendships of her own.

I believe that we as human beings have an innate need to be in community, and I think the readings from Genesis and Hebrews both reflect this need. In the Genesis reading, God has just created the first human being, or literally, earthling. God made, *ha-Adam*, the ‘Adam,’ from the *Adamah*, or ‘the ground.’ The translation Jeff read today translates *ha-adam* as ‘the man.’ Other translations will make it a proper name, ‘Adam.’ But in reality, the word is less specific than either. The word is literally a being made from dirt, an earthling. So, this human, a term also connected to a word for soil or dirt, is not meant to be alone.

In this text is both humor and irony in God's decision to give this earthling a partner. After a creation narrative where God is constantly calling things 'good,' here we are told that it is 'not good' for this first human being to be alone. So, God decides to make an '*ezer*' or 'helper' for the earthling.

The humor is that God parades every animal out first, as if the first earthling is considering each animal. Here comes a cow, 'Moo,' and the earthling says, 'That's not a good friend for me.' And then an ostrich, a warthog, and you can imagine the image being painted of every animal going by this human, and all are found wanting as a suitable partner or helper in life.

The irony is that this human already has an '*ezer*.' The term in this text is often translated as helper or helpmate. However, it is used throughout the Hebrew scripture, and '*ezer*' is used to describe the relationship of God to people, God's support. So, keeping that in mind, what we see is that God is now giving the first human being another human being who is made in God's image. So, the earthling who named the animals, names himself and the 'helper.' He calls his kind '*ish*' or man and the helper he calls '*isha*' or woman.

Like the progression from having imaginary friends to real human relationships, the first earthling is overjoyed to have 'flesh of my flesh,' and 'bone of my bone.' He now has a being who understands him, who knows what it is to be him, because this being is made from the same materials he was made from, except not from dirt, but directly from his living self, which has already been formed in God's image. This second human being is not a subservient being, but a companion.

To be an '*ezer*' in scripture is not to be a sidekick, but to make another whole or complete. As humans are incomplete without God, individuals are incomplete without each other. Just as God exists in community – a trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – so too, humans made in God's image are made to exist in community. Our connections to each other are the way God is revealed to us, and ultimately, only God sharing in our own humanity, could have fully revealed God to us, in a way beyond our imaginations.

This is the point of the opening to the Letter to the Hebrews that we read today. Like the animals paraded before the first human were good but not suitable, before Jesus came into the world, the revelation of God was also incomplete. It was not until God became flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, that we could fully understand how valued we are in all of creation, because we reflect the image of the creator. Unlike the false gods worshiped in other temples, the Israelite temple had no idol at its center. The mercy seat, the very place where the realms of God and human met, the place where heaven and earth met, had no idol in the Israelite temple – the people bore God's image. Not some statues. And so, the writer of Hebrews places Jesus in the temple's mercy seat, in the meeting place of God and humans, of heaven and earth, calling him the one through whom God made time itself. He is God's radiance and exact expression of substance.

For the writer of Hebrews, the true '*ezer*' or helper to humanity is our creator, our God, but this is no imaginary God, but the God who came in our flesh and bone, to take us, who were made

mortal, by this, made lower than the angels, and bring us up high with him, who is seated at the right hand of God, an idiom for being one with God, the very power of God. Most people are right-handed, so the right hand is a metaphor for power, the dominant hand.

Jesus shows us that to be truly human, what it means fully reflect the image of God is not to exert power by our commands, but to share in the life of others. He suffered and died in our limits, so that we might be unlimited, sharing in God's life.

My sisters and brothers, just as there was no true 'helper as a partner' for the first human, until God formed another being to be 'flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone,' so too, there was no truly complete revelation of God until the new 'first human' came. He came to show us what it is to fully reflect God's image, being God in our form, to raise us up to God with him after his suffering and death. And even though we look around and see brokenness and sin, and it seems as if things are not as they should be, we can still look to Jesus, who is not ashamed, to call us, you and me, siblings – his sisters and brothers. We're not imaginary like Josephine's, but real and God really is, right here with us – with you and with me, present in a very real way.

The one through whom all things were made, and by whom all things exist, is the originator of our salvation – our life with God both now and eternally – because this has made God complete to us, through Jesus's suffering with us. He is the one who is holy and makes us holy, and he is one with us. This is the good news, as we are told by Paul in Romans, is that we are not to be ashamed of the gospel, that the one in whom God shared in your human condition is not ashamed of you. No matter what you have done, no matter what you have been through, you and I are made holy through Jesus, not by our own accomplishments. He is the One who makes us right before God, who takes us mere humans and carries us higher than angels, into the presence of God for abundant and eternal life.

Siblings in Christ, we are not alone in this world – we were never meant to be alone. Yes, God is our 'ezer,' our helper, our companion and our partner, but not at a distance. No, God is close to us, and made us to have each other, to support each other, to see each other as flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, all made in God's image, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, ideology or anything else that the world tries to divide us on. And though this world is broken still, we can see Jesus, not only in the revelation of scripture but in each other.

Mr. Rogers famously said that when he would see scary things in the news as a child, his mother would say, 'Look for the helpers. You always find people helping.' To be truly human in God's image is to help, to be an 'ezer' as God is our 'ezer.' In the challenges of life, look for the helpers, and see God in them. If you are struggling, know that those who are helping are one sign of God's presence with you.

And when you see others struggling, be the helper they need, whether it is someone in need materially, someone in need of inclusion, someone in need of opportunity, your help will show them true humanity. In you, their 'ezer,' let them see God not as distant or imaginary, but the true God in and among you by the Spirit. And you can be a true human reflecting the image of God. Amen.