

Humanized

Luke 13:10-17

Rev. Alida Ward, 9/6/2015

In the summer of 2010,
a young man was fired from his job.

It had been a good job -- he'd been a bond trader, in Chicago,
making good money.

It wasn't what he had trained for, exactly – he had majored in history, not
finance, at the University of Georgia.

But after a friend persuaded him to come up to Chicago,
and had helped him find this job as a bond trader,
he'd turned out to have kind of a knack for it.

Made some smart moves, made a good bit of money,
made a little name for himself.

He was a bit of a risk-taker, and it kept paying off.

Until the day it didn't.

That day he risked a lot, a whole lot,
and *lost* a whole lot.

And got fired.

He'd been there all of two years, and now his budding career as a financial whiz
was up in flames.

His mother wasn't happy.

What are you going to do now? she asked.

She wasn't that happy with the answer he gave her, either.

He told her he had gotten a brand-new camera,
and he was really loving taking pictures,
even though he wasn't very good at it yet.

And he had decided he was just going to travel around for a while and
photograph things, see where that led.

Not the kind of an answer that fills a mom with confidence.

But that's what he did, this young man named Brandon.

First he drove all the way down south to New Orleans, and wandered around there, taking pictures of anything and everything: buildings, street signs, fire hydrants and people, too, of course.

Then he drove to Pittsburgh and did the same thing.

And Philadelphia.

After each city, he would post all the pictures he took on his Facebook page, and invite friends to check them out.

He started to notice that people weren't all that excited by his pictures of buildings and street signs and fire hydrants, but they always seemed to love the photos he took of *people*.

In August of 2010, Brandon arrived in New York.

He'd never been there before. He was fascinated.

With his camera, he began wandering the city, everywhere.

And even though the buildings and street signs were plenty interesting, he decided this time he'd really focus on the people.

He took pictures of deliverymen and street evangelists, drag queens and homeless folk,

an old man playing chess in Bryan Park,

a costumed Elmo in Times Square with his Elmo head askew,

a woman painting a watercolor in Central Park while wearing a mink.

Everywhere he looked, there were people to fascinate Brandon,

and the first album of photos that he posted for his friends he entitled simply "Humans of New York."

They loved it.

So Brandon photographed more and more. At first he would just label the photos with the location where he'd seen these folks.

But then he started talking more to his subjects;

he'd introduce himself, take the photograph, and then ask them what they were up to, what they were thinking, what they used to be or hoped to be.

And he started adding little captions to the pictures,

quotes, observations of these folk and their lives.

If you're one of the now **15 million people** who follow Brandon Stanton's Facebook page, *Humans of New York*, then you already know what I'm talking about. You already know the amazing capacity that these pictures have to capture your interest, your heart, your sympathy, your compassion. Each day there's a new face, and a new little story. There's a man standing behind the counter at a gas station: "My wife and I were college professors in Bangladesh" it says. A boy on a basketball court in Harlem: "I want to play in the NBA, but my second choice would be archeologist."

People love "Humans of New York." I love it. And if you ask people *why* they love it, the answer that most frequently comes back is: because it *humanizes*. Because it humanizes the city, because it humanizes the people you've walked right by, because it humanizes the folks who are different from you.

I've been thinking a lot about that phrase this week.
Humanizing people.

I've been wondering why it is that we humans seem to need help humanizing other humans, and what it takes to humanize someone for us. And I started thinking about Jesus. And I realized: you know, he never *needed* help to humanize someone else. Because he was incapable of seeing anyone as less than fully human.

When a group of lepers came up to Jesus, and swarmed around him, horrifying everyone else,

he didn't see lepers:

he saw *brothers and sisters* who were sick,
and he healed them one by one.

When a person from Samaria offered him a cup of water at a well,
he didn't recoil, as his disciples did,
he didn't care that she was from *across the border*.
he took the cup, and he drank.

And then, then there's this story for today,
this story that Anne just read to you.

One day in the synagogue, the story says,
one Sabbath day in the synagogue, Jesus was teaching.
And we know what he was teaching, because we know what he always taught:
Love.

And a crowd had gathered, of course, a huge crowd had gathered.
And the story says that Jesus looked out over all those people,
looked across the room, and saw a woman hunched over in pain.

There's no name for this woman --
the story tells us only the name that she was called:

The Bent-Over Woman. The bent over woman.

She'd been crippled for 18 years, the story says,
her back so bent she could never straighten up,
never see around her.

She could only see the ground beneath her,
she could only hear the people uttering their taunts and abuse.

And they did, they did.

Because remember when this was:

remember that this was a time when to **be** maimed, to be crippled,
meant that you must have offended God somehow...

or your parents had, or maybe their parents.

And remember that this was a time when a woman was considered less than human.

So, crippled woman that she was, she was doubly less than human.

So here she was, this woman, and this was the sum total of who she was: the Bent Over woman.

And Jesus sees her.

She hadn't asked for help -- he just sees her, sees her completely.

And he calls her to him, and says to her tenderly, "woman, you are set free", and he puts his hands on her, embraces her, holds her, and she -- she stands up straight.

After 18 years, she stands up straight.

But the story isn't over.

The priest guy, the minister there, he gets indignant.

Hey! he says, *There's no working on the Sabbath.*

If someone wants to get healed by you, let them come some other day of the week.

Well, Jesus never took stuff like that very well, and he doesn't put up with it now.

Here's what he says:

"Really?" he says "Really?"

Huh.

'Cause you know full well that if you have a donkey or an ox at home you're going to do some work for *it* on the Sabbath.

You're going to feed it. Then you're going to untie it and lead it to the stream and give it water. You're going to do all that. For your donkey. On the Sabbath."

And then Jesus says this:

"Ought not this woman,
this *daughter of Abraham*,

be set free from bondage on a Sabbath day?"

This daughter of Abraham he calls her.

Not 'this cripple', not 'this beggar'.

"This woman, this daughter of Abraham."

Jesus *in that moment* humanizes her.

She's not that person in rags that you've walked by and ignored.

She's not some creature, less worthy of attention than your donkey, your oxen.

Look at her, Jesus says, to the priest guy, to the crowd:

look at her: she is a daughter of Abraham.

She is my sister.

She is worthy.

She is *human like you*.

If we're called to be Christ-like, and we are,

if we're called to try and think 'what would Jesus do', and we are --

then first and foremost we are supposed to remember that every child of God is human like us.

First and foremost we must allow the Spirit to God to *humanize everyone* for us.

This week a picture was taken on a beach in Turkey,
a picture of a little boy.

I don't need to tell you about the picture, I know you saw it.

I know you saw the picture of three year old Aylan [Eye-lahn] Kurdi,
whose family was trying to escape the civil war in Syria in a boat that was too
small to endure the waves.

I know you saw the picture of Aylan lying on the beach,
sleeping forever,

in shorts and a shirt just like the ones we've dressed our little boys in.

Asleep forever with his hands curled up beside him in the same pose
that we, any number of us, have watched our babies sleeping.

It is unbearable, that picture.

The grief I felt on seeing it is the same grief that thousands, millions, felt on seeing it, the same grief you felt.

And what was said again and again on Thursday, as the picture went everywhere, everywhere, what was said was this:

This photograph has humanized the refugee crisis for us.

This picture has humanized what's happened in Syria.

Aylan's photo has *humanized* the headlines.

Yes. It has, yes.

From now on, when I read stories of boats adrift from warring lands, I will see Aylan,

From now on, when I hear of children caught in the crossfire, I will see Aylan.

From now on, when I hear the word refugee, I will see Aylan.

Yes, his picture has humanized those headlines that had become numbing.

But here is the challenge that I am suddenly keenly aware of.

The challenge to me, to us, to people of faith is this:

to get to the point where we need no photograph to make others human to us.

The challenge to us as people of faith is to be people of *such* compassion that we don't *need* anything to be humanized for us,

because we know already that every headline is a person,

that every statistic is a child of God,

that every story could be *our* story.

Jesus *lived* that.

Our job -- our calling -- is to live *like him*.

This month, Brandon Stanton, the photographer, is in Iran, doing what he usually does in New York.

On the *Humans of New York* Facebook page and website, he's been posting pictures of the people of Tehran and Tabriz, where he's been wandering around.

And yes, his pictures have *humanized* Iran for me, for many people.

On Friday, two days ago, he posted a picture of a little boy, a little older than Aylan, sitting alongside his father.

The boy is grinning happily into the camera -- Brandon Stanton had happened to catch him on his birthday.

And the caption below was a quote from the boy's father.

It said this:

"My son, he likes to solve other people's problems.

One time he came with me to the store and we bought two pounds of fresh apricots.

I let him carry the bag home.

He walked a little behind me the entire way.

After a while, I asked him to hand me an apricot.

"I can't," he said. "I've given them all away."

I knew then I was raising a humanitarian.""

God grant to all of us the eyes to see people like that little boy saw them, reaching his hand into the bag again and again to give away his food, seeing each person near him as a sister, a brother.

And may each child of God be humanized to us,
not only by pictures, not just by words,
but by the Love which walked this earth in Jesus Christ.
Amen.

