

Imagine going to a library seeking some information about a particular subject, but instead of checking out a book, you check out a person! That's the idea behind a project called the Human Library — a place where real people are on loan to library users. And those real people, because of the facts of their lives, represent categories such as Muslim, single young mother, HIV victim, religious convert, cancer survivor, soldier with PTSD, alcoholic, ADHD, and so forth.

They are typically available at scheduled events that might run for several hours over one or more days. Borrowers go to the event and select a category they'd like to know more about. The human "book" then sits down for 30 minutes or so with the borrower and shares his or her story, and the borrower gets to ask questions. Want to know what it's like to be a refugee? There's likely a refugee in that human library ready to explain that experience to you. And the same goes for several other topics.

Apparently, the first occurrence of the Human Library was in Denmark in the spring of 2000. It ran for four days straight at a Copenhagen location and offered some 75 "titles," chosen to inform and to challenge stereotypes. More than 1,000 "readers" showed up, leaving organizers stunned at the impact of the project.

The idea has since jumped the Danish borders, and Human Library events have now happened on every continent in the world but Antarctica. At a Human Library happening in Rochester, New York, for example, borrowers got to hear from a Vietnam veteran, a martial arts expert, a British butler, and a person paralyzed in a car accident, among many others. Which begs the question, **what if people were to "borrow" us?**

I kind of think that would be a neat idea, as it would give us an opportunity as followers of Jesus Christ to think about what people outside of our experience — nonbelievers, people of other faiths, the curious, etc. — what would they learn

if they were to "borrow" us to "read" for a while. What would they read? What would they discover?

Actually, this idea is not a new one. In an old gospel song called "The World's Bible," lyricist Annie Johnson Flint included these lines:

We are the only Bible

The careless world will read;

We are the sinners' gospel,

We are the scoffers' creed;

We are the Lord's last message,

Given in word and deed ...

Actually though, the idea goes back much farther. In the New Testament, Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, saying, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on the tablets of human hearts." And our second lesson this morning from Romans reminds us that we Christians need to be readers of our actual book, the Bible — "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" — but also readers of the living book of our faith, Jesus Christ himself — "..... live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus." And we should do all of this "so that together [we] may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Of course, it would be easy for me to focus my message on getting us to think about how good of a "book" we actually are. Annie did that in her song lyrics. The two lines after the ones I mentioned earlier are: *What if the type is crooked? What if the print is blurred?* And, what if it is? What Christian's print

isn't a little blurred? Which one of us so perfectly represents Christ that we are the "inerrant Bible" to the world?

No, I'm guessing that if someone were to check us out from a Human Library to learn what being a Christian is all about — and we told them the whole truth and nothing but the truth — they'd likely discover that there are some gaps in our pages, that some chapters are still in process of being written, and that our table of contents contains some entries that don't seem to build toward a cohesive whole.

Nonetheless, if we're serious about following Jesus, our reader would likely hear from us some things that convey that we are living differently, and conducting ourselves differently, from how we would if we weren't trying to be a disciple, and that we have a hope that serves as a beacon for our life. (Indeed, Paul referred to such a hope in our narrative for today: "... that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.")

Now in some churches, there are intentional structures where attendees can get such a read of each other. In small groups, for example, people might tell each other what the Christian journey has been like for them that week. In other fellowships, such information might be shared during a "joys and concerns" period that precedes the pastoral prayer. Some other churches have an item in their order of worship called "testimonies," or "temple talks" at which time anyone who feels so led can stand up and tell what following the Lord means to them.

Of course, one of the shortcomings of such structures is that to some degree we are being read by people who already believe. Still, that's not a waste of time. Such a telling of our personal stories allows us to strengthen, help, and pray for each other, and it also helps us know where we need to dig deeper into our faith. Furthermore, it can provide us with training, or an opportunity to practice, for opportunities we may have to be "read" by a seeker or the unconvinced. We don't

need to have a polished presentation; we need only to convey the impact of what following Jesus means to us.

If we put our Christian witness in the context of a Human Library, of course, there's a certain ease introduced since we don't have to do the initial reaching out. For many of us, approaching someone to talk about our faith is extremely difficult. But to be put on a list of available topics, and then have someone approach us, seems easier. The problem is, most of us will probably never have the opportunity to be a book in an actual Human Library event. But, there are other opportunities. After all, often times the best sharing of our faith comes naturally, and it's usually among the people we associate with on a daily basis.

Our take home for today, the main point of all of this is desire. The apostle Peter advised his readers, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you," but *wanting* to do that is the prerequisite. If that hope is strong, so will be your willingness to share it. And the fact is, whether we're looking for such opportunities or not, we are already being checked out (in the sense of being investigated or studied), by the people in our lives who know we profess the Christian faith.

According to Paul, the whole purpose of God is to form a people who in Jesus Christ mirror the righteous nature of God. They give praise, honor, and gratitude to God, living in harmony with others and welcoming all into a life of praise. The description continues at the end of our text: "I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another."

Notice the way he describes how we are to live with each other. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." We portray Christ in a true light when we proclaim him as the One who welcomes all into the fellowship of believers.

And why did Christ welcome all? Solely for the glory of God! Of course, this means that any description of Jesus Christ, as other than the gracious One who welcomes all into the company of the faithful, is to portray him in a *false light*, it is a defamation of his character. The reason the church is called to be a welcoming community is because Jesus welcomed us, and in so doing brought glory, honor and praise to God. So let the doors of our church, and the doors of our hearts, be wide open and let our proclamation of God's saving mercy be as generous and welcoming as God has been to us in Jesus Christ.

Thankfully, sharing our faith, or giving an accounting of what we believe, doesn't mean we have to go knocking on people's doors or that we need to stand on street corners with signs telling people to repent or that Jesus loves them. It does mean, however, that one way or another, we are going to be checked out by people who hear our claims to be followers of Jesus. We just need to be open books that are inclusive, easily accessible, and easy to read.

The classic hymn, an African-American spiritual, "There Is a Balm in Gilead," sings of the healing balm that comes from God, and then, in one verse, it says, *If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, Just tell the love of Jesus and say he died for all.* Apparently, there's also an alternative version that I like even better: *If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, Go home and tell your neighbors Jesus died to save us all.*

And although it may seem like a small or simple thing for us to let a neighbor, a friend, a family member, or even a stranger check us out as a disciple of Jesus, it might actually be the life-changing, lifesaving information they need to learn. Amen.