

Human community, human Jesus

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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“Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

Like most children raised by Christian parents in the South, I learned that song before I learned to sing my ABCs. It’s true that the Bible tells us that Jesus loves us, but it wasn’t from the Bible that I first learned about that love. Instead, it was from the people who taught me to sing the song, who told me Bible stories before I could read them, and who did the best they could to love me well.

I didn’t—and most people don’t—first experience God’s love through reading a book or singing a song about reading a book. My earliest awareness of God’s love came through the love of other people, mainly my family and the members of the First Baptist Church of Conley, Georgia. What was earliest remains truest: I know that Jesus loves me because people who follow him and try to be like him love me. Human love can be a sacrament, an incarnation, of divine love.

Flesh and blood community—healthy and broken, gracious and sinful—is the womb which gives birth to our experience of love. The church—the community *of, in, and for* Jesus—tells us, by word and deed, the stories of Jesus which, as the Spirit vitalizes them, makes him palpably real to us.

The people who taught me to sing “Jesus loves me” also taught me to sing “Jesus loves the little children / all the children of the world. / Red and yellow, black and white, / they are precious in his sight. / Jesus loves the children of the world.”

Those suburban Atlantans in the 1960s gave money to missions around the world, missions that included “red and yellow, black and white,” but they struggled to welcome black people into their hearts and their church. While some of them quietly respected Martin Luther King Jr., others criticized him vocally and venomously. Many of them fearfully objected to the integration of our local schools. In these and other ways, the people who loved me into an awareness of Jesus’ love did not live in harmony with it, as I have frequently failed, and still fail, to do.

It's common to say that the sins and errors of the church are evidence that it is "all too human." I'm convinced that they are indications that the church isn't yet human enough. Both the community of Jesus and Jesus himself are human: the community, incompletely, and Jesus, fully.

The community of Jesus is an incomplete and distorted reflection of him, because it isn't human to the extent that he was and is. Jesus reveals the meaning and potential of human life and, simultaneously, the character and purpose of God. Jesus embodies as fully as is humanly possible the audible, visible, and tangible truth about God. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

The more human we become, the more like him we will be; the more like him we are, the more human we will be. And, we meet him in one another: around the table where he is host and guest, the one who welcomes all and also comes to us as a stranger; in all the people who are least, last, and his—our—kindred; and in all the others with whom we seek, though it can be painfully difficult, understanding and reconciliation.

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