

# **“Only Human?” by Cynthia Farrell Johnson**



**July 14, 2024**

## **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

Good morning church. Thank you for the opportunity to worship with you and share a bit about my journey.

Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the

meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, Gracious God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen

In studying the texts for this morning's sermon, I found a common theme throughout. Praise and celebration were at the heart of the texts. It was interesting to see the many ways that celebrating God could take place. Making music with various instruments, shouts and sacrifices, sharing cakes and bread as part of a celebratory event, or simply recognizing that the gift of God's grace is worthy of our praise.

Celebrations can also result in destruction, as was the case when the head of John the Baptist was demanded as a reward for a dance that pleased the king at his party.

Creative pursuits are often inspired by the Divine. Like everything in life, they can be used to uplift or to marginalize and punish those who might not conform to what is expected by society. As long as there have been humans on this earth, we have found ways to honor our Creator through song, dance, poetry, and visual arts, to name a few. In my case, the church was where my creative journey began. I was raised in a Seventh-Day Adventist household in Brooklyn, New York. We attended a church that was mainly immigrants from the Caribbean, Central America, and Panama. Being a fidgety five-year-old, to help me get through the services, my mother, Linnet Farrell, would draw a picture in a little notepad that she always kept in her purse. Then she would give me the pad to either copy what she had done, or create something of my own. Thus began my exploration of the visual arts.

I would lose myself in that little notepad. From then on, I always asked for paints and crayons for holiday or birthday presents. And my parents encouraged me, giving me what they could to enable me to develop as an artist.

As I grew older, I began questioning what I was being taught at church. For example, it did not make sense to me that only Adventists would be saved by Jesus when he returned to the earth. There were many righteous people in this world, doing God's work of loving one another and caring for the needy.

Although I drifted away from Adventism, I never lost faith in a Higher Power, and never gave up on the concept of loving my neighbor.

Eventually, I began subscribing to *The Daily Word*, and later *The Upper Room*. These daily meditations often provided inspiration for sketches that evolved into final works. As time passed, I found a new congregation, thanks to my husband Steve. When we met, he was attending Georgetown Presbyterian Church. The services and classes there provided yet another resource for me to draw on. It also got me to wondering why the visual arts got so little attention in modern church practices.

Each of us learn in different ways. While a lot of colorful imagery is used to teach children about God's love, adults are not afforded the same type of visual stimulation. Why is that? Why are visual learners ignored? Thus began my desire to illustrate the Word.

The first project was inspired by Ecclesiastes 3:1 – 8. In the gallery, my interpretation of "a time to mourn and a time to dance," "a time to tear and a time to mend," along with "a time to search and a time to give up," are all that remain from that series. The feedback from those images encouraged me to continue my exploration of sacred texts and songs.

Music has always been an important part of my life. Both of my parents sang. My mother was a soprano, and my father, Arthur Farrell, was a bass-baritone who had taken voice lesson once he settled in New York. Since he attended church on Saturdays, he hired out at Protestant churches on Sundays.

His day job was as a printer, but music was his passion.

His hero was Paul Robeson, and he had the pleasure of meeting and singing for Mr. Robeson as well as performing with Lawrence Brown, Mr. Robeson's longtime accompanist and arranger. My father sang many of the spirituals and work songs from Mr. Robeson's repertoire. And he always talked about the fact that Mr. Robeson spoke 6 languages—which made me want to learn as many as I could when I grew up.

Some of my most cherished memories from my childhood are the Sunday afternoons when Dad would go up to the Harlem YMCA to pick up Mr. Brown and he would join us for dinner. Afterward, he and my father would practice some of the spirituals that they would later perform at churches in the New York Metro area and beyond. That provided inspiration for my next project—a series that I called **Songs of My Father: Many Thousands Gone**. The first seven paintings in the gallery are from that body of work.

When the National Portrait Gallery mounted an exhibition on Paul Robeson, the gift shop carried a CD called *The Power and the Glory*, featuring most of the spirituals that he usually performed with Mr. Brown. Listening to that CD was like listening to my father and Mr. Brown because sometimes Mr. Brown would sing along with my dad, just as he had done with Mr. Robeson. It was then that I finally understood why people were so excited when my father performed those songs with Mr. Brown.

As all of this was going on, other ideas popped into my head, inspired by sermons or information shared in our Adult Sunday School classes. Professors from Wesley Theological Seminary were featured speakers for these classes on a regular basis. One person really provided a Divine spark! Dr. Denise Dombrowski Hopkins gave a series of classes on the Five Women in Matthew's Genealogy of Jesus. Her descriptions were so vivid that I began sketching out portraits of the women. At

the same time, I was accepted for an artist residency at Wesley. It was the answer to a prayer! Now I could finally be in a place where visual arts were an integral part of the worship experience. It was there that I met Deborah Sokolove and learned more about ways to integrate art and religion.

At the heart of my work is celebration and praise. Celebration of the good that people are doing despite the headlines of doom and gloom that we are bombarded with every day in traditional and social media. I truly believe that there are more people in the world doing good and caring for their neighbors. I also seek to praise out Creator and express gratitude for every good thing that we have in life. Honoring those who work hard to provide us with all that we need, physically and spiritually, is another motivating source for my work.

God has given me a precious gift, the gift of seeing the world in a different way and the ability to share those visions through painting and drawing. My goal is to use that gift to lift the spirits of anyone viewing my work. Each of us has the capacity to create beauty in this world. It is my hope and prayer that through God's grace, you will find ways to share your visions of beauty with the rest of us. That will be the best way to celebrate and praise our Creator. God gives creative powers that can be used to praise Him/Her, or we can use them in a destructive, hideous manner. We must take the gifts that each of us have to express our love for each other and for our Creator.