

Reflection for August 16, 2020

Walls that Divide

When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless.

“It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”

“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

May the peace of the Lord be with you always.

Let us pray:

Holy and gracious God, sometimes we forget that you are here with each and every person we seek to reach. Sometimes we forget that no matter what one undergoes in this life, through whatever trial or tribulation, you are there to redeem and reveal mercy and love and in that we hope. Right now. Right here. Amen.

There was a book published a few years ago with an odd title: *Things We Wish Jesus Had Never Said*. Guess what? The story of the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28) topped the list.

Having left the Galilee, Jesus travels to the margins, to a liminal space where the land meets the Mediterranean. It’s a border where a Jew can meet a Canaanite. Unlike Mark, who identifies the woman as Syrophenician, Matthew recalls an ancient enemy of Israel: Canaan. This brings centuries of history and conflict into the dialogue. No longer is it just a conversation between a healer and one who wishes healing. It is about the indigenous people of Canaan and their displacement by the Hebrews.

Into this legendary fray, a mother's voice can be heard calling Jesus by his Jewish messianic title, "Son of David." By using this title, she implicitly acknowledges the priority of the Jews in the divine plan of salvation. There is nothing on earth as potent, tenacious, and determined as a mother pleading on behalf of her child. Jesus, however, does not respond to her; the ancient borders are still firmly drawn. However, unlike Peter, who had hoped to walk on water to Jesus and the resultant failure of his self-imposed test of his bravado, this woman will not give up. She will cross boundaries of animosity and cultural mores to save her daughter from the demons that bind her.

Approaching Jesus a second time, she assumes a posture of desperate submission as she kneels before him and once again begs for help. This rather rude Jesus is not the Jesus this Canaanite mother was expecting to find. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26). Scholars have often argued that if Jesus says something in Scripture that seems offensive to us, it is probably authentic. But here we seem to have words so starkly prejudicial that they run counter to everything else Jesus reputedly said. The response from Jesus is shocking. Thus, I suspect that here we have a popular expression of prejudice Jesus is deliberately quoting.

No doubt Gentiles had been labeled "dogs" by Jews. Dogs were not family pets in Israel. Wild dogs roamed around villages and were regarded as filthy; they fed on the flesh of the dead. "Dog" is a racist slur. But she has a comeback! "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Matthew 15:27). "Yes sir," she says with laughter, "but under the table puppies can eat the children's crumbs." She answers prejudice with laughter. How do you answer prejudice? Anger simply breeds more anger and drives the prejudice deeper. So the woman laughs and turns the hard word "dogs" into playful puppies under the table.

In August 1966, the Ku Klux Klan put on their bedsheet uniforms to parade through the streets of Memphis protesting the Beatles concert. There was a tense, angry crowd lined up watching. But all of a sudden a little girl turned to her mother and exclaimed, "Do they think it's Halloween?" The crowd began to laugh, and the remark passed along with a wave of spreading laughter until the parade was chased away by gales of laughter. So the woman, because she cared for her daughter, turned prejudice into laughter: "The puppies eat the children's crumbs," she said, and laughed the cruel slogan away.

Dr. Ahmed Jakda is a palliative care physician, working in a field where patients and families are experiencing the end of life. While the eventual end is known, the journey to get there is fraught with a roller coaster of emotions. Palliative physicians often say that surgeons have their scalpel and they have their words. He is also one who has been on the receiving end of discriminatory words from strangers that have been harmful. He reflects on words which can heal and the words which can hurt: "The amazing thing about words is that they can be equally impactful in a completely opposite way. How fortuitous that with some learning, practice, and patience, people who say harmful things can change their words of harm to words of good."

As Barbara Brown Taylor observes, "The line [Jesus] had drawn between him and the woman disappears; the limits he had placed on himself vanish, and you can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do. He is no longer a Messiah called only to the lost sheep of Israel, but God's chosen redeemer of the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike, beginning with this Canaanite woman. Through *her* faith he learns that God's purpose for him is bigger than he imagined, that there *is* enough of him to go around, and in that moment there is no going back to the limits he observed even a moment ago. The old boundaries will not contain his new vision; he must rub them out

and draw them bigger, to include this indigenous woman today and who know what tomorrow. It looks like answering God's call means that he can no longer control his ministry or narrow his mission. There is no more safety or certainty for him, no more guarding against loss or hanging on to his cherished notions about the way things ought to be. Faith works like a lever on him, opening his arms wider and wider until there is room for the whole world in them, until he allows them to be *nailed* open on the cross" (Crossing the Line, p. 64).

The woman's plea challenges Jesus that he should be about conquering human exclusions and the walls erected that separate God's children. Her cry opens him to respond to her faith. And in this openness the kingdom widens, allowing Jesus to call others to be open as well.

In spite of all that remains broken, we can trust that God is still on a mission, working all things for good. For healing. For restoration. And this is grace. Though the ways of God are mysterious and though the arc of human history bends in ways that may seem to defy God's goodness, God's purpose is mercy and God's method is grace. We are invited to participate in God's mission of restoration, working with God to heal the broken places. How, then, do we respond with our lives?

Nibs Stroupe grew up in the segregation of the Deep South in the 1940s and 1950s. In white, segregated, southern life, he was taught (and he believed) that God had ordained those classified as white to be supreme and to rule over others. He was taught this, not by cross-burning KKK members, but by loving and decent Christians, who also taught him so much about the love of God. "They helped the grace of God seep deep down into my bones. While they taught me about the grace of God, they taught me racism at the same time."

It's a painfully disarming story, and the fact that so many Africans and people of African heritage remain faithful Christians is a tribute to their ability to see the authentic Jesus through the racist distortion and their

invincible grace to forgive. Let us pray that God's Spirit will give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to receive, so that we can be converted and transformed and welcomed into the new world of the God movement in our midst, so that we may receive the prophets of God in the name of Jesus. "Christians should be in a condition of permanent revolution and embrace the constant admission that we can be better and do more" (Michael Coren).

Let us pray:

Merciful God, your grace is bigger than we can imagine, wider than we can dream. In a world where racism, hatred, bigotry, and fear diminish your image in others, you remind us there are no exclusions from your family, no barriers to your open arms. Your expansive welcome reminds us never to keep others from your life-changing love or deny them your life-giving bread. Amen.

Afterword

For the past several weeks, the lectionary has included readings from Genesis. The following is an afterword from Karen Armstrong.

Throughout, the authors of Genesis have been at pains to remind us that we can expect no clear-cut answers. From the very first sentence, we have had to wrestle with the text, and in the course of that struggle we may, like Jacob, have a brief moment of illumination. Genesis offers few consistent doctrines. Its teachings are frequently contradictory. What, for example, does it tell us about God? That he is omnipotent but powerless to control humanity; omniscient but ignorant of human yearning; creative but a destroyer; benevolent but a killer; wise but arbitrary; just but partial and unfair. Genesis points out that, as the most eminent monotheists have since emphasized, we cannot understand God or predict his behavior. The sacred reality must always

remain an ineffable mystery which fills us with dread but exerts a ceaseless attraction. Our world is beautiful, baffling, and tragic. When we hear of devastating natural catastrophes or contemplate the millions of starving, suffering human beings, it is sometimes impossible, if we are honest, to imagine that the benevolent, omnipotent God of the first chapter of Genesis is really in control of his creation. Our day-to-day experience of the divine is more like the rest of Genesis, our insights fitful, transient, paradoxical, and ambiguous.

Survival is an important theme in Genesis. Banished from Eden, human beings had to struggle to remain physically, morally, and spiritually intact. Most of us get damaged at some point along the way. Genesis is true to life here. It shows us no paragons. Even the great patriarchs of Israel have feet of clay. Moments of grace and inspiration in their lives are frequently followed by episodes which show these men to be as flawed, negligent, self-indulgent, apathetic, and egotistical as any of us lesser mortals. Genesis does not provide us with people who have achieved virtue. Its stories are nothing like the lives of the saints that I was given to read as a child, which depicted these men and women as impossibly and depressingly flawless. The biblical authors do not seem to think that that kind of moral perfection is possible. Instead, they show us individuals struggling, like Jacob, for insight and the state which they call blessing.

From the first, Genesis teaches that a blessed life is possible for all creatures; we can all find our correct element and thrive therein. But Genesis also shows that it is more difficult for human beings than for other creatures to remain in the place allotted to them. We are conflicted and torn, tempted by the evil inclination, which is the source of some of our more brilliant cultural achievements as well as of our greatest crimes. Adam and Eve wanted knowledge. Like many religious people, they tried to attain privileged information. But the inescapable

message of Genesis is that blessing and enlightenment are not achieved by acquiring facts and believing doctrines. Genesis gives us no coherent theology but seems to frustrate our desire for clarity at every turn. Instead, knowledge means self-knowledge and an understanding of the mystery of our own being. We also have to recognize the sacred mystery of our fellow men and women. To seal ourselves off from others, like Noah in the Ark, can only lead to disintegration and abuse. The most memorable moments of blessing and revelation come from dynamic encounters with others, such as when Abraham rushed out to greet the strangers at Mamre and met his God, or when Jacob wrestled with God and found that he had been struggling with his brother and with his own self.

If Genesis does not allow us to make assumptions about God, it also refuses to let us imagine that we can fully comprehend one another. The patriarchs constantly surprise and even shock us; right up to the end, we are in the dark about the true feelings of Joseph and his brothers. Other human beings remain as opaque and mysterious as God—indeed, they can reveal to us the essential mystery and otherness of the sacred. Genesis traces God's gradual disappearance from the human scene. By the end, God no longer speaks or intervenes directly, and human beings can achieve the integration and wholeness for which they long only by coming to terms with their own natures, their own crimes, grief, and resentment. We have to make peace with the past, as best we can. It is a struggle in which we may never fully succeed, but only if it is undertaken can we become a source of blessing to the world and to others.

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