

The 11th Sunday after Pentecost
August 20, 2017
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15:10-28

I was reading the funnies the other day – a respite from national and international news that I find so deeply disturbing, not to mention the dreaded “apoc-eclipse”! Anyhow, I was reading the funnies and was surprised to come upon some theology in one of them, Candorville.

It’s kind of a fascinating comic strip, actually. The main characters are Black and Latino, which is part of what I like about the strip; they show me another slice of life. But there’s more to them than that. Lemont Brown, for example. He’s a Black man living in the city. But that’s not all he is. He’s a reporter, too. And he’s smart and well-read. And he’s a bit socially awkward at times. And he’s a nerd. So we get social commentary. And we get quirky little story lines, as well.

Anyhow, through the first three panels in this past Wednesday’s strip, Lemont is going on and on about one of his nerdy ideas to his best friend, Susan Garcia:



Susan says Jesus “never would’ve” picked his nose. Well, after reading this morning’s gospel, we might wonder. If you’re not bothered by the encounter between Jesus and this unnamed Canaanite woman, then I think maybe you’re not paying attention. Because, at least as far as I’m concerned, the way Jesus treats her just doesn’t seem like the kind of thing Jesus “would’ve done.” Picking his nose is far less gross than that.

Before we get there, though, pay attention to what Jesus has to say first. He teaches the crowds and his disciples that a person is defiled not by what he or she puts into their stomach but by what originates in their heart and comes forth from there.

As Eugene Peterson puts it:

It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life, but what you vomit up.

Actually, I think even that is a sanitized version of Jesus' words.¹ But you get the point.

Jesus is talking to good people, religious and faithful people, telling them that none of the things that set them apart and make them think they're better than someone else matter.

And there's at least an undercurrent of ethnic and racial pride at issue here. The rules were set up to set them apart from other people – Canaanites, for example. But Jesus is saying none of the things they were taught to be careful about – race or ethnicity or gender or disability or class – none of these superficialities define a person or defile a person. And none of them can make one person better than another either.

That's all well and good, you might say. And that all sounds like Jesus. But then the rabbi leaves that place and he encounters this unnamed Canaanite woman who comes along desperate for someone to care. And Jesus treats her ... well, by the standards of his own teaching, I think, he treats her abominably. She begs for mercy for the sake of her tormented daughter, and Jesus remains silent, ignoring her entirely.

His disciples complain about her "squawking," and they ask Jesus to send her away, and Jesus seems to give in to social pressure to conform. He tries to get rid of her.

Finally, when she refuses to be ignored or turned away, he insults her by calling her a dog.

Now I suppose I should tell you that there are those who say that Jesus must have been doing something else. So I should allow that there are a couple of interpretive "tricks" that can take the apparent edge off. Some say that the "traditional interpretation" is for us to understand that Jesus was just testing the woman, expecting her to persist ... and she did!

Another interpretive "trick" is to suggest that Jesus was parroting conventional attitudes, hoping his disciples would be appalled by the inhumanity of it all.

Maybe.

But these "tricks" seem to me to be designed more to protect the preconceived idea that Jesus "never would've done that" than to understand the encounter as it's presented to us. If this were anybody other than Jesus, I think, we might not hesitate to call him sexist and/or racist.

Now I know it's not easy for most of us to think of Jesus that way. Jesus is the one we see welcoming sinners and tax collectors, touching lepers, associating with people that other people dismissed or rejected. I get that. But it's also hard to get past the harsh words so plainly put.

It may be a challenge, but maybe the challenge is really what we need to see about Jesus.

In the ancient creeds we affirm him as fully divine and as fully human. As human as any of us, Jesus didn't control what others told him about the world. He was raised in a particular time and place. As a first-century Jew, he was born into a world of boundaries, discrimination, and exclusion. It was the air he breathed, the water he drank. To say he was brought up to be less concerned for a Canaanite woman than for his own kind isn't unfair; it's simply a reality.

And it's the same reality that pertains for any of us, as well, of course. We didn't control what our parents told us, or what we saw played out before us on the big screen or in the public sphere, as we were growing up. Raised in a particular time and place, we, too, were born into a world of boundaries, discrimination, and exclusion. It was the air we breathed, the water we drank. That doesn't make us bad; it's simply a reality.

But if Matthew lets us see this human side of Jesus, Matthew also shows us a Jesus willing to move past the past. Maybe it didn't come naturally to him, or easily, but Jesus lets a woman teach him in the end. He learns from a Canaanite. In that sense, it's a stunning moment – and an edifying one. To follow this example is to reject the assumption that we already know all that we need to know about God and others, in particular to reject any theology that insists that God looks just like some of us and gives some permission, thereby, to look down on others.

On the heels of stories such as those coming out last weekend from Charlottesville, Virginia, Lutheran preacher and teacher David Lose says that today's gospel is important and timely:

... just as the Canaanite woman teaches Jesus that God's mission and vision and compassion and mercy are bigger than what he may have initially imagined, so also might the Canaanite woman teach us the same at a time when synagogues are threatened, mosques are being fire-bombed, and neo-Nazis and white supremacists march the streets: every time you draw a line between who's in and who's out, you will find the God ... on the other side.ⁱⁱ

When all is said and done, I think Lemont Brown's friend, Susan Garcia, probably got it wrong. I think Jesus, at some point in his life at least, probably picked his nose; he would've done that. It's a little gross, I know, but there are a lot of gross things going on in this morning's gospel. Jesus talks about sewers, after all, to begin. And he shows us – if only for a moment – that some folk at least in his day were entirely okay with the idea that it's okay for some people to treat others as less than human. But what would be harder for me to swallow is the idea that Jesus would allow the way he was raised define and ultimately defile him. Indeed, seeing him reject the lie that some people are better than others is a witness to me and to you that we can be more than what we have been. What defiles us is not how we were raised. What defines us is what we do now and what we do next. And that's the good news of this morning's gospel.

ⁱ Given Jesus' reference to what enters the body and ultimately "goes out into the sewer," it might be more shocking (and more accurate?) to hear Jesus as more upset by the "crap" that comes out of our mouths than with what gets flushed down the toilet.

ⁱⁱ David Lose @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-11-a-the-canaanite-womans-lesson/> -- accessed August 17, 2017.