

What About the “Others?”

Most of you know me well enough to know that I do like a challenge. One of my ongoing dissatisfactions with the Revised Common Lectionary has been that its devisors tend to omit verses that might be problematic for the unwary preacher. In the past, when presented with a suggested reading in the lectionary that omits verses in the middle, I’ve almost always spent a fair amount of time trying to get to the truth of exactly those verses. Part of this is my own temperament. “Ornery as a Missouri mule,” they say. But it seems to me that when we find a piece of scripture that bugs us, that seems irrelevant or outdated somehow, chances are we need to take a much longer look to figure out exactly what that piece of scripture is saying to us.

So when Brian McLaren’s [We Make the Road by Walking](#) confronts the reader with a pericope from Deuteronomy that many would find outright appalling and combines it with a Psalm that is generally not read in full in worship due to its rather bloodthirsty ending and a story from the Gospels that makes modern Christians squirm, my contrarian heart is delighted. McLaren calls his chapter on these passages, “From Ugliness, A Beauty Emerges.” I think he’s a little too optimistic about that. As I dig into these verses, I see that they continue to reflect a good deal of ugliness that is still very much abroad in the world. The beauty, though emerging, is still very much a potential rather than a reality. But I do think that these passages encourage us to ask the question that I’ve used as a title this morning: “What About the ‘Others?’”

Deuteronomy 7’s clear approach to how to deal with those we might consider “others,” is pretty disturbing. Kill them. Kill them all. If you leave them alive, they will lead you to worship their gods and I, the jealous god of Israel, will not stand for that. So just wipe them out.

One of the best things I learned growing up in primarily Southern Baptist churches as a boy was to take the Bible seriously; seriously enough to read all of it, seriously enough to question it. And the key to the questioning, as recorded in the old 1962 “Statement of Baptist Faith and Message,” is this: “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.” I have a really hard time reconciling the first five verses of Deuteronomy 7 with the message of Jesus.

So, why is this passage in our Bible? Why hasn’t it been expunged along the way? What are we to learn from it, in the criterion of the message of Jesus? For me, it’s a vivid reminder of just how imperfect we humans are. Even when we attempt to hear and follow God, we often get it wrong. I think what we’ve got in these verses is a bit of “retconned” history. Do you all know the term? It’s a familiar one to fans of long-running comic books and TV shows, particularly those of the science fiction variety. It happens when a new episode or edition has details that seem to contradict an earlier episode or edition. Think of the way that the Klingons in “Star Trek” changed appearance, for example. Outcry from the fans will then often lead the editors or producers to address the problem in another episode or edition by providing a retroactive continuity to the story, an explanation after the fact that harmonizes the two versions of the story. The story has been “retconned.” I think Deuteronomy 7 has been retconned. The Torah, remember, was probably put in final form *after* the Babylonian Exile. When the scholars assembling Torah looked around them and asked, “what went wrong?” somebody, or somebodies, probably said, “It’s all the fault of those other people. If they hadn’t been around to tempt us, we would have stayed faithful to God. We would have been better off wiping them out. (Which, of course, they didn’t.) That’s what God must have wanted.” And so, human

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desires which were evil were cloaked in the mantle of “God’s will.” Thank God that never happens anymore, right?

Of course, when that sort of thing gets memorialized in Scripture, the problems it causes are ongoing. There has continued to be a xenophobic strain, a hatred of the “others,” in Judaism to this day, as there also is in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and every other philosophy known to humankind. “We’re right and you’re wrong,” is a universal trap. We’ve all fallen into it from time to time. Thanks be to God, there is also the opposite strain in all religions and philosophies. From the Old Testament, circulating at about the same time the Torah was being finalized, there is the witness of Isaiah, whose prophecies look forward to a time when all people will be drawn to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel and be blessed. And, as I’ve noted in this place before, Jesus of Nazareth was greatly influenced by the work of Isaiah and his hope for the future.

Which is why it seems oddly out of character for Jesus to initially reject the woman in our Gospel story today. I’ve preached before on Mark’s version of this story, so forgive me if some of what I say seems like repetition. There are some differences to the two versions. The author of the Gospel According to Matthew, in a nice bit of irony, places the story of this encounter immediately after Jesus’ argument with the scribes and Pharisees about what is clean and unclean. Then Jesus takes his disciples to a place filled with ritual uncleanness: The Gentile district of Tyre and Sidon, today’s Lebanon. And that’s where he meets this persistent, dare I say “uppity,” woman.

Some details are worth noting. Matthew refers to Jesus’ antagonist as a Canaanite. A Canaanite? Nobody was called that in Jesus’ day. Brian McLaren notes that it would be like us calling residents of Mexico City “Aztecs” or friends from Scandinavia “Vikings.” But this may be the first clue that Matthew leaves us to connect us back to Deuteronomy. It’s also worth noting that residents of Tyre were held in particular contempt by their neighbors in Galilee, where Jesus was brought up. Tyre, built on an island, had to import its produce from Galilee. In times of famine, the wealthy Tyreans were able to buy the bread right off of the tables of their poor Galilean neighbors. The bread of the children, as Jesus noted, was unjustly given to those “dogs” from Tyre. Jesus and his friends could well have made the case that the Tyreans were guilty of the warning of Proverbs: they took the bread of the poor, rather than sharing, taking for themselves because they were rich, and the Galileans were poor.

It’s also important for us, in our dog-loving culture, to remember that dogs were not loved by Jesus’ contemporaries. In the first-century Middle East, people rarely kept dogs as pets. They were regarded as wild, dangerous, and unclean, and if Jesus thought of himself as a shepherd and Israel as his flock, dogs were renowned as enemies of sheep. So, I have a hard time buying those sweet excuses for Jesus that he was just kidding or testing the woman’s faith or anything like that. I think Jesus, possibly tired, not really wanting to deal with somebody else’s problems that day, had a very normal human moment. He saw someone who represented the ancient enemies of his people and he snapped.

Does that make Jesus a sinner? Well, it certainly speaks to the truth of the Epistle to the Hebrews which says he was tempted as we are. But look at what happens. Jesus doesn’t

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explicitly apologize but he does something better – he praises her faith and tells her that her daughter has been healed. In other words, he treats her just as he would have done a woman from his own tribe. You could say that Jesus got woke. And having realized that he had been acting outside of what was righteous, he made it right. And then he kept on making it right.

It's more obvious in the version of this story in the Gospel According to Mark who traces Jesus' next steps more explicitly but what Jesus does next is to go to the Gentile territory abutting Galilee around the Sea of Galilee. He teaches and heals and, as Matthew points out, the people leave praising “the God of Israel,” an odd expression for him to use had Jesus' audience been Jewish. Then Jesus feeds four thousand folks in the wilderness. Of course, just one chapter earlier, he'd fed five thousand but those had been fellow Jews. Part of the symbolism of that story is that there were twelve baskets of food left over, one for each of the tribes of Israel. In this story, there are seven baskets of food left over, one for each of the nations which Deuteronomy said should be destroyed. In recognizing the humanity, need, and faith of the Canaanite woman, in healing his Gentile neighbors and then feeding them, Jesus reverses the curse on the inhabitants of the Promised Land attributed to God.

One of the ongoing tensions for the early Church, witnessed in the New Testament, was how to welcome Gentile believers into the Beloved Community. For some early followers of Jesus, the Gentiles could only be Christians if they were also Jews, following the Law of Moses in regard to all things. The Acts of the Apostles seems to say that this was all settled quite early in a debate between Paul, Peter, and James, but Paul's letters indicate an ongoing issue. There's a reason Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Learning not to see those who are not like us in some way as “other” is hard, even for Christians.

Like Jesus and his disciples in the region of Tyre and Sidon, we are all on a journey through sometimes hostile territory. Sometimes, our reaction to that journey is going to be to form up for safety and present a defensive face to the world. We may wish, like the writer of Psalm 149, “to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, to execute on them the judgment decreed.” We may then say to each other, “This is glory for all (God's) faithful ones.” Hey, it's in the Bible.

As I read these passages this week, I was put in mind of the short story by Mark Twain, entitled “The War Prayer.” Do you know it? In the story, a prayer service is being held to ask God's blessings on the young citizens who are off fighting in a war. A strange man appears who assures the worshippers that God has heard them but also wants to make sure that they mean what they are praying for. “When you say, ‘O grant us the victory, O Lord our God,’” he tells them, “this is what it really means.”

“Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth into battle — be Thou near them! With them — in spirit — we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows

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with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended in the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames in summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it —

For our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!

We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.”

“Ye have prayed it; if ye still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most High waits.”

The story ends with this postscript: “It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.”

There is, of course, a great deal of sense in Twain’s story but it is a hard and bitter sense, a sense that speaks to the outcomes we either don’t intend or won’t admit when we think we have God’s blessing on our dividing up of humanity into “them” and “us.”

My dear friend, Rev. Steven Greenebaum, recently retired as the minister of Living Interfaith Church, traces his ongoing spiritual awakening to an incident when he was 12. In his just-released book, One Family: Indivisible – A Spiritual Memoir, he tells the story this way: “I was by myself, either playing or reading. All of a sudden, a voice was speaking to me. I was startled to say the least. It was an inner voice, but I knew what it sounded like when I talked to myself and this was different. It had never happened before and stopped me in my tracks. ‘They are killing each other in my name. Stop it.’ Oh, swell! What the heck was THAT?” We may not get to hear from God quite as clearly as Steven did, but God’s call on us is unmistakable. We are all one in Christ Jesus. The hated Samaritan is our best neighbor. We are our brothers’ and our sisters’ keeper.

Some years ago, at an Evergreen Association leadership retreat, I told my friend Rev. Ken Curl about the guilt I carried for my slave-owning and racist forebears. Now that I recognized the injustice of how Black people, Native Americans, Latinos, and other minority groups were treated, I felt complicit. Ken looked me in the eye and said, “Man, you can’t carry that. You just do what you know is right.” He was reminding me to take my cue from Jesus. Jesus participated in his culture’s discrimination against Gentiles when he called that Canaanite woman and her child “dogs.” But when he, as we now say, “Got Woke,” he didn’t carry a load of guilt with him. He simply did what he could to make life better for that woman, her child, and as many of her neighbors as he could reach. That is also the call on us, Good Shepherd. Once we become aware of injustice, it is not for us to simply bewail it or our complicity. It’s not for us to beat our breasts and proclaim our guilt. It is for us to act, to open our doors, our hearts, and our hands to those who’ve been misused. It is for us to speak out, to write letters and make phone calls, and to vote against those who represent divisiveness and hatred in this country. It is for us to educate

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others and to forgive those who also wake up to injustice, so that they also will not carry a load of guilt and shame. It is for us to work with God to continue to build the Beloved Community of justice and peace. For the work to be done and the courage to do it, thanks be to God. Amen.