



The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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The Making of Us
Jeremiah 29.1-7 and Luke 17.11-19
Russ Dean, September 19, 2004

The New Testament text was read from Clarence Jordan's 1960's translation of the gospels, entitled, "The Cottonpatch Gospel":

While he was on his way to Atlanta, he went through the ghetto of Griffin, where he was met by ten winos who stood at a distance and yelled, "Mister Jesus, have mercy on us!" When he saw them he said, "Okay, go show yourselves to the doctor." And as they were going, they were cured. Now one of them, realizing that he was cured, turned around and shouted, "Praise God! Praise God!" Then he got down before Jesus and thanked him. This particular one was a black man. So Jesus said, "Weren't there ten of you that got healed? Where are the other nine? Well, well. So didn't any of them come back here to praise and thank God except this black man, huh?"

He said to the man, "Get up and go. Your trustful action has been the making of you."

She had beautiful, light brown skin. She was from a nice family. She was athletic, a good student, and a member of the high school band -- clarinet section. He was a trumpet player, a few years younger than she, and the son of the pastor of one of the small town's prominent churches. They went to school together in the late 1970's and '80's, virtually unaware of the tensions of school segregation and then of the forced integration, busing, and race-riots that had preceded them by only a few years.

But Friday afternoons when the two band buses stopped in front of the school, the students segregated themselves. There was no malice or ill will. "Birds of a feather flock together," right? They named their buses without slander, but by simple description of the obvious: the bus in front was the "black bus," and the one behind, the "white bus." When loading time came, students filed mindlessly into place, with only a few exceptions to this standard. There were the shy, lonely whites, the quiet outsiders who wouldn't make

enough fuss to claim a seat on the white bus, who found themselves just as alone each week at the front of the black bus. And there were a few others who simply defied the thoughtless tradition and “crossed over.”

So the white preacher’s son found himself on the seat with the black clarinet player, nearly every band trip. They sat together amidst the joy-filled chaos of travel. Building friendship. Enjoying the music. Laughing and sharing the food that went up and down the aisle. Apparently, in all the sharing, more than friendship was growing on one side of the seat, but that white boy was too young and naïve to recognize love at first blush.

One Saturday they traveled to the big city for a parade, and in the downtown area, near the university, a young, bi-racial couple held hands and crossed the street in front of the bus. In broad daylight. (Imagine that!) From his seat next to the window, the well-meaning white boy on the back of the black bus showed his contempt for such a thing, and without even knowing it, he broke her heart.

But the heartbreak was about much more than high school romance. The pain was deeper than that, and one that she undoubtedly already knew more about than he, in all his innocence, could have even imagined. You see, in a small town in the American south in the 1980’s, you could study together and work together, you could play together and eat together, you could share common interests and defy bus-assigning traditions, and enjoy the wonderful, beautiful “color-blindness” of your world, together. But, when it

came right down to it... the prejudice he didn't even know he had, still ran too deep to build a foundation of true community.¹

One preacher was well-respected: Trained. Poised. Eloquent. He represented the church; he voiced the concern of the people; he spoke for their God. In their trouble he consoled, "Don't worry. Have faith. God will bring us out of this despair." And the people said, "Amen, preacher. Tell us what we want to hear." And so he did. "God will bring us out of this trouble... in just a few years. God will bring us home²... if..." "If, what, preacher?" "If, you remain pure. Keep our traditions. Defend our way of life. Honor our God. And, by all means, stay away from them."

"Amen, preacher, that's what we want to hear!" (People have always loved the power that religion can confer upon their own stereotypes and prejudices.)

The other preacher wasn't as respected. In fact, most people thought of him as a kind of religious wacko. They knew him as something akin to the town lunatic, the street corner evangelist, who wore odd clothes, did strange things, like lie naked in the street just to get people's attention, and was always ranting and raving some new judgment against the people. "People of God," he said. "God is going to bring us out of this trouble... but it's not going to be any time soon." (And the people laughed.) "So, you might as well get comfortable." (And the people scoffed.) "And while you're there, you might as well get to know the people." (And the people frowned.) "Learn their language. Celebrate their traditions. Absorb their culture." (And the people fumed.) "And, there's

¹ I'm not suggesting that interracial relationships are *necessary* for community to exist, but a society or a culture which cannot *allow* for such relationships has certainly failed to recognize the true meaning of community. See my comment below, "...true community is boundless and free."

² "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house...'" Jeremiah 28.2-3.

just one more thing... let your sons marry their daughters.” (And the people jeered.)
“Give your daughters to their sons.” (And the people cursed his name, for Jeremiah’s message to Jews living in exile in Babylon could not have been any more offensive than if he had told a slave-owning father in the late 1800’s to marry off his daughter to a black man.) (See Jeremiah 29.4-7.)

So, it’s probably a good thing that old, crazy Jeremiah was delivering this good news via the mail, for his message infuriated the Jewish people, who were too quick to pick up a stone, anyway. Jeremiah’s heresy of assimilation offended their religion, and cut them to the quick of their own prejudice. “We can’t mix with... them... Hananiah has told us our God demands our purity.”

The controversial former pastor of New York’s Riverside Church, William Sloane Coffin has observed,

...unconditional love represents a state of perpetual danger; it never plays safe. So we are right to fear it, wrong only to refuse it. And obviously we can’t refuse it and still claim allegiance to the unconditional love of God in person (that is, in Christ) on earth.³

Because truth is always dangerous, the people of God have too-often sided with the Hananiahs of this world, those who proclaim safety and security, who encourage us to conserve our traditions, our values in the name of our God, those who love preach-easy proclamations which keep the multitudes happy and cheering under the false pretense of keeping the peace.⁴ But this kind of peace, peace which cannot, will not, open itself to the outsider, will always fail to allow real community.⁵

³ William Sloane Coffin, “Some Thoughts on Community,” in “The Living Pulpit,” October-December 1994 (emphasis added).

⁴ Such preach-easy rhetoric is not only the stock-in-trade of too many preachers, but of politicians clamoring for the popular vote as well. But we must learn, especially in a season of political campaigns, to cut through the rhetoric and the cheers and ask the more difficult questions. Are “our” traditions, “our”

It was decades before the Israelites could proclaim Jeremiah the true prophet. I'm guessing that it took a generation of mulatto grandchildren, born to Israelite sons with darker-skinned Babylonian wives, to soften their hearts and change their theology. And, even so, the Israelites returned home, seventy years after Jeremiah's message, and once they were there... they forgot everything they had learned about what real community is all about.

When Jesus heals the Samaritan, there is much more at work than a physical healing. Such occurrences and stories were commonplace. Luke's message, as with the story of Jeremiah and the people of exile, is a story about elitism and a closed community, and the dangerously broadening grace of God. It is the telling of the Good News of welcome.⁶ It is the response of gratitude of one who knew such life-giving love, from personal experience.

The point of Luke's story is not that Jesus had the power to miraculously heal. Luke seems to accept such power as a given. The point he is making is wrapped up in the dramatic, and, for his original hearers, surprising, conclusion to his tale. In the return of the Samaritan, the "black man," the outsider, we find a truth that we still need to learn today.

It is too easy for us to assume that we have God boxed and wrapped neatly, and in our corner. That we, and we alone, have rightly understood. That we, and we alone,

values what really matter (whether we are speaking religiously or politically), or are there values and traditions of a community beyond "ourselves" that we must seek if we are ever to know true peace, justice, truth, happiness, security?

⁵ Jeremiah warned of those who preach, "*Peace, peace, when there is not peace*" (Jeremiah 6.14).

⁶ The opening Meditation in today's worship bulletin was, "The gospel is community. The good news that Christianity has to offer is not salvation from sin and damnation but from isolation and alienation." James Adams, in a review of the book, *Re-Imagining Life Together in America: A New Gospel of Community*, by Catherine T. Nurney and Hal Taussig.

rightly follow. It often takes an “outsider,” someone who sees from a different perspective, who has been through a different experience, to open our own eyes to the surprising, challenging Way that God works. And against the protests of the preachers and to the dismay and the people, this Way often turns out to be a way previously deemed “heretical.”⁷

Against the protests of the Israelite community, the Good News was finally proclaimed to the Gentiles. (I wonder if it was those children whom Jesus held in his arms who first understood Jesus’ offer of inclusion to anyone beyond the boundaries of Judaism? (See Matthew 19.14.)) Against the protests of southern preachers, slavery was finally rejected as an abhorrent practice that ran counter to God’s purposes, though for hundreds of years it was proclaimed an institution, divinely ordained. (I wonder how many of the preachers who recognized the error of their ways actually grew up playing with the sons and daughters of black slaves?) Against the protests of the Southern Baptist Convention and other conservative groups, women are participating in recognized roles of leadership in churches around the world, though many still pronounce God’s displeasure with such “unbiblical” practice. (With a woman in this pulpit week after week, our children gratefully have no understanding of that controversy.)

What will our children teach us next about community? Will it take a generation of children raised by loving gay fathers and lesbian mothers to bring the church to understand that God’s grace extends to that community as well? Will it take a generation of Arab and Israeli children, in dialogue, to finally break the cycle of violence in the Middle East? Will it take a generation of children in a culture absorbed in materialism

⁷ I capitalize “Way” as an allusion to the designation of the first followers of Jesus, who were known as “followers of the Way,” long before they were called “Christians” (see the early chapters of the gospel of Acts).

and adrift in a sea of individualism to recognize that what we really need and what they really want -- is really the same thing after all?

In the conclusion of the story, Jesus tells the man to get up and go, and he says, “*Your faith has made you well.*”⁸ The word Luke uses is most frequently translated by one of the forms of the word for “salvation.” What Jesus offers this outcast, who had known a life of alienation and condemnation, was not healing, but salvation -- which is, unconditional love. Acceptance. Forgiveness. Inclusion. Respect. What Jesus offered to a Samaritan in Jewish Israel, he offered to the black man in southern Georgian in the 1960’s, and he offers to the lesbian woman in Charlotte, NC today who has no acceptance in her family, to the Muslim wrongly stereotyped as a terrorist, to the person dying all alone from AIDs tomorrow... What Jesus offers is a grace, called Community.⁹ The true mark that we have known such community for ourselves will be our ability to express this Grace, as did the Samaritan, in deep gratitude.

Alan Culpepper asks,

If gratitude reveals humility of spirit and a sensitivity to the grace of God in one’s life, then is there any better measure of faith than wonder and thankfulness before what one perceives as unmerited expressions of love and kindness from God and from others? Are we self-made individuals beholden to no one, or are we blessed daily in ways we seldom perceive, cannot repay, and for which we often fail to be grateful?¹⁰

I love Clarence Jordan’s translation. *Get up and go. Your trustful action has been the making of you.* His translation reveals the truth we need in this day –

⁸ The Greek verb *sesoken* (“has healed”) is the perfect form (which indicates state or condition) of the verb *sozo*, “to rescue, to save, to heal.”

⁹ Capitalization is a key to a full understanding of some of my words (which is, obviously, unavailable in an oral sermon). Community, the rare experience of relationship unfettered by prejudice and fear, has a divine character.

¹⁰ Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, “Luke,” p. 328.

for none of us is “self made.” We are made by the community around us. We are made by those who reach out and accept us, as we are. We are made by those who show us love and respect, by those who make our lives worth living.

Not that I am putting myself up as a sterling example gratitude, but this day, I gladly tell you of my deep gratitude for all of the people in my own life who carefully, by bits and pieces, a nudge here, a sermon there, have taught me that true Community is boundless and free. I am grateful to all of those people this day, not the least of whom is a beautiful black girl named Pamela Dowdy, who taught me by a single glance, that took me two decades to discern, that what Margaret Walker once said is utter truth and can be applied to all of humanity:

White folks needs what black folks got just as much as black folks needs what white folks got, and we’s all got to stay here ‘mongst each other and git along, that’s what.¹¹

May it be the making of us all.

Amen!

¹¹ Margaret Walker, quoted in “The Living Pulpit,” October - December, 1994.