

Boundaries Redux

Fane told us the story of being at Jollibee down the street a little while ago when a houseless man with a fist full of coins got in line.

The counter lady started yelling at the fellow to leave, and when Fane went up to top off his payment, the woman got even madder.

Fane told us this story in Bible Study, and we all kind of wondered why the counter lady got so upset, until we realized that she and the regular customers are all insiders, while this houseless fellow was a definite outsider.

I'm no different from this counter lady.

Walking back to church from Chinatown the other day, a tall haole guy approached me for a buck.

For a guy who touts the theology of YES to every request for help, the "no" that travelled out of my mouth at the speed of light surprised and shamed me.

And then there was the death of Senator John McCain.

The burial service at the National Cathedral was a gathering of the political establishment, much of which is at war with the current occupant of the White House.

Past presidents and dignitaries of all sorts payed their respects to the late Senator and to the virtues of patriotism, military service and honor — yet ironically for this Episcopal Service in the Nation's Cathedral, the enemy, whom we are called to love, was conspicuously absent: a clash of insiders and outsiders on a grand scale.

When I worked at a flop house in Boston back in my seminary days, the most stunning lesson I left there with was how the drug addicts looked down on the alcoholics and how the alcoholics despised the drug addicts.

Insiders and outsiders — even on skid row.

And all of this got topped off when I mentioned to the monks that the bathrooms in Shim Hall are gonna stay closed until our houseless friends who use them belly up and agree to police their use and clean up and take care of things; only to be told by the monks that the houseless blame the “outsiders” for making a mess!

The “outsiders” being those who aren’t living in tents on Kanoa Street.

And so it goes...

This is our second gospel lesson in a row to confront the vexing problem of who’s in and who’s out.

Last week it was the purity rules among the Jewish people.

Today, it’s a confrontation between Jesus and a decidedly pagan woman.

And Jesus himself seems to struggle with this oh so human foible of drawing lines between people, setting up classes of insiders and outsiders.

When I imagine this woman, I always imagine a poor peasant woman on her knees, which makes Jesus’ crack to her about feeding dogs even more hard to swallow — after all — isn’t Jesus open to everyone?

Isn’t he kind to everyone who seeks him out?

But then I stumbled across some context that helped make this story, if not easy to sit with, at least understandable.

The historians tell us that the place Jesus lands up in today, this city of Tyre, was more like Kahala than Nanakuli, and that this lady may very well have driven up to the house Jesus was hiding out in — in a Mercedes.

Imagine a rich woman in India driving over to Mother Theresa's home for the destitute, begging help for her daughter...

A response along the lines of: "Uh, that's nice but we have our hands full", would not be unexpected.

Which makes the interplay between Jesus and the woman even more remarkable, since instead of being offended by the clear insult, as one might expect a society gal to react, she acknowledges that she is not entitled, but nevertheless stands her ground, seeking grace.

As one fellow observes,

"Jesus is deliberately scandalous — throwing stumbling blocks in people's way.

He lambasts the Pharisees by calling them hypocrites to their face and scoffing at their beloved tradition, and he insults this Gentile woman by comparing her to a dog." Garland, New Application Commentary, 293. Modified.

"So ask yourself, what in this story offends **you**?

How would **you** have responded?

Our answers perhaps reveal much about ourselves.

Some might say, "If that's his attitude, then so long buddy!"

Others might just crawl away, defeated.

I mean, who on earth wants to be called a hypocrite, an evil generation, a brood of vipers, whitewashed tombs, sneaky foxes or unworthy dogs?

In the face of these painful truths, pride kicks in, and the temptation is to turn to the little gods that we create, gods who won't offend us, because we convince ourselves that we are adorable and that God owes us her grace and help.

Taking an unvarnished look at myself, the good, bad and ugly, is always a painful task, and given the choice, one I will avoid as often as possible, and at all costs.

So it is that perhaps only when we are truly desperate are we willing to do whatever it takes, including the shattering experience of humbling ourselves, to find God's help." Id at 294. Modified.

And when we let go of our fears and pride, what we discover is that the only ones Jesus sends away empty – are those who are full of themselves. Id. at 296 quoting D. Moody.

And this fact applies not only to individuals, it applies to our institutions as well.

It's no secret that our churches are struggling with everything from sex abuse to plain old irrelevance.

Fr. Richard Rohr, a favorite of mine, insists that the church will not be faithful to Christ until and unless we get back to our founding principles, principles that are the very definition of humility.

He says,

"Much of what Jesus taught was faithfully followed during the first few hundred years after his death and resurrection.

His followers were on the bottom, at the edge of the empire, they shared in the rejected and betrayed status of Jesus, and therefore they knew what he was talking about, they lived it everyday.

The values of Jesus, pacifism, simple living, inclusivity, and love of enemies flourished when Christians gathered secretly in the catacombs, with a faith untouched by empire, rationalization, and compromise.

In 313, Constantine legalized Christianity and Christianity increasingly accepted, and even defended, the dominant social order, especially concerning money and war.

Morality focused on the individual, and sex.

The church, rather than being resident aliens with a radically new way to live life, instead began to mirror the status quo.

Before the year 313, Christians could not join the army, because the army was killing Christians.

By the year 400, the entire army was Christian, and they were now killing the "pagans."

Before 313, the church was always on the margins of society, the best place to be for understanding the liberating power of the Gospel.

But then, the church moved from the basement to the penthouse, from the catacombs to the basilicas.

When the Christian church became the religion of the empire, it read the Gospel through the lens of maintaining power instead of trusting the "power of powerlessness" that Jesus reveals.

In truth, Christianity became a different religion!

The dying Roman Empire needed an emperor, and so we crowned "King Jesus," snatching him out of the Trinity and plopping him down on a throne!

Mercy, meekness, and transformation were exchanged for law and order and power, while Jesus' teaching about simple living, nonviolence, inclusivity, and love of enemies became, well, ..., incomprehensible." R Rohr, modified.

A woman from the margins approaches Jesus today.

She stands her ground, and receives her blessing.

If we are to follow Christ, and not merely admire him, we too must go to the margins, to those places that keep us vulnerable and open – even when being there feels frightening or threatening or lonely.

And if we do, then like the brave woman in today's gospel, we too may receive a blessing, a blessing that changes everything.

+amen

