



Communing with Contradiction



The Collect

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

First Reading *Genesis 45:1-15*

Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.



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Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Psalm 133

Oh, how good and pleasant it is, when brethren live together in unity!
It is like fine oil upon the head that runs down upon the beard,
Upon the beard of Aaron, and runs down upon the collar of his robe.
It is like the dew of Hermon that falls upon the hills of Zion.
For there the Lord has ordained the blessing: life for evermore.

Epistle *Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32*

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.



Gospel *Matthew 15: 21-28*

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

It's been a couple of weeks now since I began as a priest and rector in your midst, and I *had* thought that things were going reasonably well, until I learned that tomorrow, the sun will be blocked out of the sky and darkness will cover the face of the earth - or at least part of it. I just want to say that with only 20 days on the job, that particular eventuality is not my fault. In fact, Monday's darkness was planned well ahead of my arrival; an obscuring of the light that the universe has been conspiring to bring about for quite a while. For those willing to brave what is being billed as the traffic snarl-up of the century, there should be the opportunity to see the eclipse from the vantage point of what is called 'the path of totality'; where the obscuration of the light can be most fully seen.



I wonder if you have been feeling as I have this week, hoping for your own path of totality, a place to stand from which you might be able to make sense of the world for what it really is? This digital age of 24-7 media coverage presents to us a seemingly never-ending 'path of totality', of news, and wanna-be news, most of which tends to dull our souls while exciting the surface of our minds. Yet, there are events that stop us in our tracks - like those of the past week, that began in Charlottesville and have rippled out well beyond it. As we have debated in this country what it means to remember the past, and to recognize the present for what it is, and in doing so call out the ways by which fear and hate have become too much the hard currencies of our common life, we might hope to make sense of it all, and in doing so find ourselves looking up once more at the figurative sky and crying out to the heavens as we realize that the light we now see eclipsed had been made so by a long-established darkness.



For today, in this place of beauty and hope, among people who love us, and welcome us, and see in us the better angels of our nature, the reality that we face is that the awful events of Charlottesville, where Heather Heyer lost her life and scores were injured, were not entirely new tragedies, but shameful reminders that this darkness has been with us for generations.

Since Cain took his own brother, Abel's life, humankind has had a taste for blood, and since God commanded the freed Hebrew slaves to conquer and take the land of the Canaanites, we have struggled to reconcile the human capacity to love with the tensions that pervade racial and ethnic difference the world over. As the poet, Tennyson, wrote, nature is 'red in tooth and claw', and there are times when I think that human nature is the most red of all.



Perhaps, then, we might have come here today, as part of our effort to take stock of the world, striving to listen intently to as diverse a set of viewpoints as we can, such that we might see the world more clearly from the lived experiences of others. We might also have come here to listen to one another's confession, to bring before God what we have done and the good we have left undone. Whatever our hopes in being here today, we all come here to be nourished, and blessed, and then sent out, back into the world that God has made and has redeemed, to live as the broken body of Christ in a hurting world.

We do all of this, not on our own but as a community, as a spiritual family, as people called by God to dare greatly for the sake of God's kingdom, and we do so as good stewards of what it means to be God's beloved here in Midtown, Atlanta. For our forebears in this parish of All Saints' also looked out to the world as we do today, and asked how they might honor the dignity of every human being, in a world that seemed so determined not to do that very thing.



So, how do we continue to tread in the footsteps of those who have come before us and be a beacon of light for this city of Atlanta, seeking and serving Christ in all persons? And, in doing so, how do we retain the grace-filled character of this parish, in being home to all sorts of views and viewers, as we seek to live *with* our differences in honesty and courage?

In answer to such questions I offer you this: let what you see trouble you; let it unsettle your assumptions; and allow yourself to be changed by what you see.

Of course, if you are looking for trouble, there is rarely no better place to look than the Bible. Those of you who were paying particularly keen attention to the proclamation of Matthew's gospel this morning will have noticed that the Jesus we meet in his encounter with a Canaanite woman is not the sort of Jesus we are usually accustomed to. This Jesus is more troubling than that. Listen again to the sequence of events as they occur: a desperate mother, who happens to come from an ethnic background historically in conflict with the Jews, comes to Jesus looking for a healing



for her demon-possessed daughter. In response, first, Jesus ignores her completely; then he tells her she is from the wrong background - not from the house of Israel - to be helped; then, he, in essence, calls her a dog - an animal Jews considered unclean - and finally, when the woman pushes back that even dogs eat the crumbs under the table, Jesus dispenses healing, letting her know that her faith is great.

The context for this is that Matthew's thoroughly Jewish gospel presents Jesus as a man of his time; where Jews and Gentiles were not always best of friends, and where racial and gender differences were real and present power disparities. Jewish men came first in Matthew's world, and so Matthew most likely would have seen no contradiction between Jesus perfect in love and action, and Jesus the man we see presented in this story.

No contradiction for Matthew perhaps, but plenty of contradiction for us. Jesus' apparent reluctance to help the Canaanite woman is hard for us to reconcile with our baptismal covenant that calls on us to respect the dignity of every human being, and the particularity of his saving power, seemingly reserved for those of his own ethnic



background, is clearly in tension with the universality of our theology, that sees the grace of God made manifest in Christ Jesus as open and available for all people.

The opportunity here, though, as with any tension point in our lives of faith, or in our politics, or within our families, is to allow these hard to reconcile components to question our assumptions, assumptions that may have remained unspoken, yet powerful within us all the same. Perhaps it is our assumption that the Bible is a clean and clear account for us of what it looks like to live a godly life. It is not; it is riddled with contradiction and internal debate, which is part of its great gift to us, because so are we. Perhaps it is our assumption that the Church's holiness and righteousness is what enables it to share Christ's light to a darkened world. Whilst it is true that the Church is set apart, it is only truly able to be faithful to such a vocation by seeking forgiveness for an institutional life that has been responsible for violence and bloodshed, an incubator for anti-Judaic thought, and a safe haven for colonialism. In other words our sacred texts and our historical legacy as Christians are filled with contradiction.



Yet it is when we choose to live within such contradiction and allow its tension points to unsettle us, that we have the hope of being expanded on the inside of who we are and drawn closer to others, even as that closeness reveals the fuller extent of our complicity in others' pain and loss.

Last weekend a mother and a father lost their daughter, and in turn each of us lost a portion of the life in communion with one another God intends for this world. As we heard in our reading from the Hebrew Bible this morning, for Joseph, and his brothers who had sold him into slavery, it was necessary for those who had been at enmity to move close enough to one another to be able to feel the pain of loss and grief. Only when they had come face to face could they see their true identity and tell their truth to one another's power. Only when they had dared to live within the tension that their past held could they begin the hard work of reconciliation and communion with one another.



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We also are called into such a communion of contradiction. We also are called to speak our truth to one another's power. We also are called to draw near to one another in faith and hope. May what we see, as we face our truth, open our hearts. There is no place to stand on the earth that offers us a total vision of reality as it is. There is only your place, and my place, and the courage to forgive one another and be forgiven.

Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner, help me to see all those whom you call beloved.

Amen.



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