

Grace, For You and the World

September 5, 2021

Snobby God

Scott and I have been binging “Downton Abbey” this summer. He’s never seen the series, and while I watched it when it first came out, it’s almost as delicious the second time around. For those of you who aren’t familiar with the show, it’s the story of the interactions between landed aristocrats and the dozens of staff who serve them, set in the north of England in the early 20th century.

There’s a scene we saw recently in which two of the more high ranking servants decide to go out to dinner, a very rare treat. They make a reservation, but when they arrive, the maître d’ sees from their clothes that they are not aristocrats, and tries not to seat them.

It just so happens that the Lady of the house is also dining there that night. She sees that there seems to be an issue, tells the maître d’ that they are her friends, and flustered, he grants them access.

As they’re being seated, Lady Grantham stage whispers: “I’m glad I could help. He’s such a snob.”

Of course, the irony is that her whole life is built on snobbery.

This all comes to mind as I pray and reflect on today’s scriptures, both from the Letter of James and the Gospel of Mark. James flat out names snobbery, asking at the beginning of our reading today, “do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?”

Our Mark reading is a little less direct, but perhaps even more impactful. Jesus himself goes to the region of Tyre, which is north of Israel on the Mediterranean seaboard. He is approached by a Greek woman from that region who begs him to heal her daughter. Jesus’ response is, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

WHAT?

Jesus was just a racist snob. Jesus just called the woman’s daughter a dog, implying that his healing should first go to HIS people, and only if there is something leftover should it trickle down to others who are different than him.

For people who have been taught that Jesus is omniscient and wholly blameless, this is one difficult passage. But that commitment to Jesus’ perfection is a later theology, the concept wasn’t on the mind of the author of the Gospel of Mark.

I’d like to suggest today that, like the Gospel writer, we would do much better to read this story, not with our modern commitments to a perfect Jesus, but rather embracing the beauty and grace of this witness that Jesus, when faced with his own racism, is gracious enough to acknowledge it and change.

In my Friday email to you all, I shared Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes' poem, "Even the Dogs" with you, which is about this passage:

From the slime that's been slung,
through the epithet thicket,
through the tangle of shouldn't
and couldn't and can't,
with love and guts and feist
she rises up,
not with a desperate plea
but simply knowing more,
for the moment,
than Jesus does
of what is possible,
and what is right.

She names the slight,
slingshots the slur,
paints the gallows, exposes the lie—
and claims her human place.

And Jesus learns a thing or two,
about her, about those pagans,
about himself. About grace.

It's not Jesus who does the miracle. She does.
The power is in her faith in herself, and her daughter,
and their place in the house of grace.
The healing is in her: her rising up.

And you, sister: what have you been called?
What table have you been shoved under?
What crumbs are yours, that will multiply
like loaves and fishes?
Name them.

You see, the real grace here, is in the woman holding firm to her own worthiness, even when the great and powerful man has dismissed her. And so, as we're exploring how this passage can help us to live a more authentic life of faith, how this passage can lead us into a richer experience of following Jesus, a direction that will be fruitful for many of us is to reassess how we understand who is worthy, and our own worthiness.

Spiritual writer Nichola Torbett invites us into this practice of re-thinking, suggesting:

Sometimes God is depicted as a kind of grant committee making decisions about who will receive funding and who won't, or a social worker gatekeeping benefits, or one of those credit card representatives at the airport offering free gifts to anyone with good enough credit to qualify.

But both of our scriptures today tell us that this judging, this gatekeeping, this snobbery, aren't the way that God works. Rather, divinity is in mutuality, in relationship. Torbett suggests that we cast our lot with God when we, "join with others to quilt together whole new ways of getting communal needs met."

So what?

When we follow these scriptures to call us back from the image of God as gatekeeper, as arbiter of worthiness, and instead we root ourselves in the truth that everyone – EVERYONE – is worthy of divine love and grace, we are led down two paths, one personal, and the other communal.

First, purely by virtue of existing, you are worthy of God's love. James tells us that you're worthy of God's love if you're poor. Mark tells us that you're worthy of God's love if you're a foreigner.

AND

You're worthy of God's love if you're LGBTQIA.
You're worthy of God's love if you're depressed.
You're worthy of God's love if you've had an abortion.
You're worthy of God's love if you're two years sober.
You're worthy of God's love if you're two hours sober.
You're worthy of God's love if you're not sober.

You see, the miracle in our Gospel passage isn't done by Jesus. The miracle is that the woman doesn't let his dismissal unmoor her from her worthiness.

Now, while this may resonate with some of you, others are thinking, "I'm stronger than that. This 'worthy of love stuff' is fluff." But I'd like to point out that hyper-independence, the unwillingness to receive support from others, is a trauma response, too.

Understanding oneself as being worthy of God's love doesn't only manifest in someone being willing to take some food out of the Blessing Box when they need it. Being worthy of God's love also looks like being willing to rely on other people. Rather than building a fortress of overfunctioning and overachieving, believing that one is worthy of God's love extrapolates to a healthy willingness to lean on others for support.

This idea of overfunctioning and hyper-independence as signs of someone's internal dialogue of unworthiness reminds me of a woman at one of the first parishes I served. She was a high power business executive, always dressed to the 9's, on the go, the person you wanted around you in a crisis, and she confided in me that her mother had died when she was 15, and she had never cried since. Thirty years without a tear.

In getting to know her better, I came to learn that her extreme independence, her unwillingness to let anyone help her, her need to be in control, was wrapped up in losing her mom and not being able to trust that the people you depend on the most aren't going to drop out when you need them

the most. The armor of success that she wore covered a heart that feared that it wasn't worthy of relationships she could rely on.

Now, this is an extreme example, but I suspect that some of you are resonating right now, even if it would be too vulnerable to shake your heads in understanding. The good news is that trauma acknowledged is trauma that can heal.

And so, whether you identify more with the poor and the downtrodden or the achiever who tightly holds everything together:

“You are worthy of having support.
You are worthy of having true partnership.
You are worthy of love.
You are worthy of having your heart held.
You are worthy to be adored.
You are worthy to be cherished.
You are worthy to have someone say, “You rest. I got this.”
And actually deliver on that promise...
You don't have to earn it.
You don't have to prove it.
You don't have to bargain for it.
You don't have to beg for it.
You are worthy.
Simply because you exist.”
(Jamila White)

And the second path then, is obvious. If you are worthy, everyone we encounter is, too.

Conclusion

That's the genius of the Gospel, really, that what's good news for you is good news for all.

Friends, my prayer this week is that each of you will be evangelists, people who share Jesus' good news of great joy, that God's love is yours and mine and everyone's for the receiving.

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James 2:1-9, 13-17; Mark 7:24-37
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