

Message: "Countering Blind Guides" - 9-16-26

Scripture: Matthew 15:10-28

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³ He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.^[e] And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶ Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² 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." ²³ 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." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters'^[f] table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

I have some strange questions to ask you today; these may seem to come out of nowhere, but bear with me -- there is a point.

Did Jesus, as an infant, have to learn first to crawl, and then to stand up, and then to walk? Did Jesus have to learn these things? Or did he come pre-balanced for mobility by divine infusion? Did Jesus have to learn to walk, or did he simply start one day?

Did Jesus have to learn to speak? Did he have to learn the language of Joseph and Mary? Did he have to learn ancient Aramaic and Hebrew? Or did he come with his neurons automatically calibrated to phonetics and definitions? Did Jesus have to learn to talk or did he have a contemporary Rosetta Stone language learning software already downloaded in his mind?

Did Jesus have to learn spatial geography? That is, for example, did he have to learn the geography of Nazareth, the pathways of his early-years home, where the town center was, where the farms and shops were, and where the best places were for jumping into a cool spring on a hot summer day? Did Jesus have to learn locations or did he have Google maps imprinted in his brain?

Did Jesus have to learn manners? Did he have to learn when to speak and how to speak to his elders? For example, did Jesus have to learn to say "bsamlokh" and "tawdi elokh?" That is, to say "please" and "thank you?" Or were these hard-to-pronounce Aramaic words pre-loaded into his comprehension? Did Jesus have to learn manners or was he born polite?

I could go on and on with these sort of questions, which at heart have as their point another question argued about through the ages when it comes to Jesus, and it is this: JUST HOW HUMAN WAS JESUS? It could be put another way - JUST HOW DIVINE WAS JESUS? The quick, easy, and blasphemy-proof answer is FULLY BOTH, which I have always found not helpful at all, at least to our efforts to relate to God or even know ourselves. Our feeble attempts to have our human understanding embrace what a fully-human/fully-divine label means is always problematic for the simple fact that each label defines itself to some degree as the opposite of the other. Human is differentiated from God as God is differentiated from human. They are not one and the same. Except when they are in Jesus. Which still doesn't really help.

I don't need to go deeper into any of this, though, to make the point that, if Jesus was fully human, one aspect of being human that carries across all of our species is learning. We learn how to live, think, behave, and otherwise function as biological entities on this earth; we learn how to relate to each other, how to express our interest in and love for each other, how to identify commonalities and differences and how to build social platforms around such; we learn how to study the past and predict the future in order to make more of the present (at least, that's the hope!); we learn what to do and what not to do through experiences of pain and suffering; we learn what to say and what not to say through experiences of communication; we learn how to manage our lives and help others to do the same (again, hopefully!).

So if Jesus was fully human, did Jesus learn in these ways? The reason that question matters this morning is that in our scripture passage today, it seems extremely clear that Jesus learned something. That is quite a radical thought for someone who believes that Jesus, as God, already knew everything that God knew, for having learned something new implies of course that it wasn't known before. We're talking about the interchange he had with the Canaanite woman, of course. It's worth rereading that part here:

"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." ²³ But Jesus did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the

crumbs that fall from their masters'^[f] table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment."

Did you hear Jesus reverse course? BASED UPON WHAT HE LEARNED ABOUT HER? BASED UPON HIS LEARNING THAT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES WERE NOT AS IMPORTANT AS FAITH? Jesus models something I consider essential to any faith that is real - it is constantly open to learning more about what's true and what's false, what's important and what's trivial, and most importantly, what is of God and what is not.

These are days where we need to learn -- or re-learn perhaps -- what it means to be a follower of Jesus. I differentiate this from the title "Christian" because of the tremendous misuse that label has received in the last few years, being made a tool of the state and a pawn of money-making endeavors like the selling of gilded Bibles and the association of Jesus with the promotion of violence. Nothing could be farther from the truth of God's son, but we need to learn this again and again and again, for there is such a strong effort these days to learn wrong things, damaging things, completely false things about our God.

Case in point: this last week I saw a post from the Department of Defense; here it is (slide). The post was placed on two Defense Department accounts; it shows images of military personnel overlaid with the words "Send Me!" Chief Pentagon spokesperson Sean Parnell quoted Isaiah 6:8 in one of the posts and included the all-caps phrase on an image of a soldier silhouetted in the dark. It is obviously a military recruitment effort; and it is one of the most egregious examples of scripture contortion I have ever seen. What does Isaiah 6:8 say? Isaiah 6:8 says: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" God is calling on Isaiah to warn the people about ignoring God. There is absolutely no call to violence; there is absolutely no call to war. And there is certainly no sense of national alignment with the will of God. This Department of Defense recruitment is nothing less than a profound abuse of scripture - it is completely blind to what the scripture is trying to say.

That's where we find ourselves far too often these days; people are demonstrating their utter blindness when it comes to God. People in power are especially doing this - and leading many to believe that God favors our wars, that God favors the wealthy, that God approves of violence as the way to handle things, that God will protect us from illness better than vaccines or medical

science, that God prefers America over other countries - none of which God will ever do. Our faith is being maligned and abused for the sake of political gain; our faith is being contorted into its opposite, manipulating God into something that supports human agendas. This is the blind leading the blind, as Jesus puts it - and THIS IS ALWAYS WRONG; this must be called out and resisted in as many ways as we can.

So how do you counter such blind guides? And how do you deal with the blindness they encourage? As always, the best counsel comes from Jesus himself. "14 Let them alone;" says Jesus; "they are blind guides of the blind.^[e] And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." I don't think Jesus is saying "do nothing," but something quite opposite; rather than expend futile effort convincing blind guides of their blindness, become more active in opening eyes, our own and those who are willing, as we strive towards God. Those who are blind by choice will have no use for us; they have no actual desire to discover God, for they have their own deity created in their own image that they use to influence others, they have concocted their own truth that serves their agenda. They will have no room for a God who interferes with our desires, who lifts up the marginalized and vulnerable, who would have us love our enemies rather than bomb them, who states that the meek shall inherit the earth and that peacemakers are blessed, who says that every life matters, period.

We must trust that it is as we authentically live into the life Jesus promoted that we will be offering an alternative to the world's blindness that is much more worthy of life - all life, not just our own, and not just humanity. That's the kind of thing imposed blindness can never achieve; it depends upon forcing vision to see only what is desired, only what is controlled, and nothing more. I heard a wise insight recently which I thought made this point: "There are people who only watch Fox News because Fox News tells them they should only watch Fox News." You can replace "Fox News" with any news source or information platform, and the truth remains overall -- THAT IT IS ALWAYS AN INVITATION TO BLINDNESS WHEN SOMETHING SAYS LOOK ONLY AT OR THROUGH ONE THING TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD. Vision is maligned when we define focus too sharply; the sharper the focus, the more we miss of the surrounding reality. If we do this to try to understand God, we will absolutely miss God; keeping open to the expansiveness of God - keeping open to learning about God -- keeps faith authentic.

We must keep in mind that, with God, there is always more; there will always be more; and it is impossible to confine what God has made infinite. Let me put it to you this way: Whenever someone says they know God absolutely clearly, my advice is to kindly walk away from them; Jesus counsels the same, for you are talking to a blind person.

We counter the blindness of the world by learning more and more about God. We counter the blindness of the world by learning to love the unlovable, by learning to care for those discarded by the world, by learning to help those who cannot help us back; we counter the blindness of the world by learning how to bring God's love to bear in practical ways -- by speaking out when silence would be so much more comfortable; by uniting to resist what harms those who are least amongst us. We counter the blindness of the world when we refuse to hate those who hate us; we counter the blindness of the world anytime we speak truth to power and compassion to cruelty; we counter the blindness of the world when we choose grace over revenge. There are so many ways to counter the blindness of the world, all of which require that we always continue to learn the better ways of God, the greater inclusivity of God, and the all-reaching love of God. I for one believe that Jesus continued to learn; and I think this clearly means we should, too.