

## **HOMILY**

**Sunday, August 20, 2023**

**Canon Clyde Kunz, Licensed Lay Homilist**

God is good  
All the time.  
And all the time  
God is good.

As you may know, our Bishop, while at the Lambeth Conference in London last year, developed a close friendship with Bishop John Orina, a newly-ordained Bishop in the Anglican Church of Kenya, who had been assigned the challenges of opening a new diocese in far south-western Kenya.

Bishop Jennifer had learned that Bishop John faced many of the same challenges we face here in the diocese of Arizona: issues related to fair compensation of clergy, a number of small rural parishes that are geographically very distant from one another, and a Christian environment in which the Episcopal Church (or Anglican Church in Kenya) is not even close to being the predominant denomination.

Learning that his clergy received compensation of less than \$150/month (if they were compensated at all) Bishop Jennifer led an effort here in Arizona to raise support for clergy salaries in Bishop John's Kenyan diocese. And we were successful in raising more than \$19,000 - not a lot by American standards, but a HUGE benefit to Bishop John in his efforts to recruit and retain qualified African clergy.

Our Bishop then believed that we should form a delegation to travel from Arizona to Bishop John's diocese headquartered in the city of Kisii - a town of only about 16,000 people, and invited several others in the diocese to be part of that visit. After talking it over with Brian, we decided that - as President of the Standing Committee, our diocesan Board of Directors - and despite the considerable expense involved, I should probably be part of that group. And so, along with Bishop Jennifer and Rev. Anita Braden, our Canon to the Ordinary, I became part of a 5-person delegation visiting Bishop John and the parishes in his diocese.

Next Thursday evening, we 5 African pilgrims will be making a presentation about our visit via Zoom. If you have an interest and have not already done so, I urge you to go to our diocesan website ([www.azdiocese.org](http://www.azdiocese.org)) to register so that you receive a link to the presentation.

Our Hebrew Scripture reading this morning takes place in Egypt, which of course is also in Africa (did you notice my slick segue?) What appears on the surface to be a truly heartwarming feel-good story about family reunification is much more than that, and is in some ways deeply troubling.

If we read the novella that is the story of Joseph from beginning to end and taking up much of the book of Genesis, we will remember that his brothers sold him into slavery because he was - let's call it as it was - an annoying, arrogant and pretentious little thorn in their sides. And while this reunification story makes it appear that Joseph is the all-good, all-forgiving brother and that everything is going to be Kumbaya afterward, that simply wasn't so.

If we follow the story from beginning to end, it begins with Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery and convincing their father Israel that Joseph is dead. He, however, thru a bit of dumb luck, sharp wit, an ability to interpret dreams, and business savvy (which by the way involved taking land from and

impoverishing the local farmers) he won Pharaoh's favor and became very powerful in Egypt. It is then that we see his brothers traveling to Egypt to ask for help but not recognizing him.

But family reunion and harmony this ain't. Sometime after today's very abbreviated version of the story, we learn that when Jacob (or Israel) their father dies, the brothers all fear that Joseph will now have them killed. He doesn't of course, but it speaks to the lack of trust that still remained in that family.

Sounds as though it would be an absolute goldmine for any qualified therapist or the writer of a made-for-TV movie.

More troubling perhaps is the fact that this passage of scripture has been used for generations as a Biblical justification for slavery. These passages make it sound as though it was "God's will" that Joseph be enslaved. Worse is that a similar justification is still being used today, and some are even pointing to this passage even from the pulpit to defend the idea that 21st century education curricula should be modified to teach that "some slaves learned valuable skills that benefited them later in life." Joseph becomes the favorite hero in that very flawed narrative.

The idea that slavery, with all the brutal treatment, sexual violence and family separation that it frequently entailed, was in some twisted way a "good thing" supported by scripture - whether here in North America or anywhere else - cannot be of God. If that's true, then I'm worshiping the wrong deity!

Like my new friends in Kenya, I really do believe that God is good, and that God is good all the time. And I don't believe for a minute that God wanted Joseph to be enslaved, any more than slavery is the plan for any of God's children.

If we read the passage carefully, we realize we are reading Joseph's words, not God's. And while I do admire Joseph's apparent ability to look for the hand of God in all things, that by no means meant that God had some grand "slavery plan" in place. What would that say about the hundreds or perhaps thousands of people who - alongside Joseph - were also slaves in Egypt? Were they too just part of God's plan to make Joseph come out on top in the end? The fact that one individual was able to claw his way out of an horrific situation in no way justified the enslavement of others.

It reminds me of how often in our society we point to a single individual who is able (as we like to describe it) "to pull themselves up by their bootstraps" to achieve success having been born into dire circumstances. The fact that it can happen to one in no way means it's a real possibility or even in any way achievable for others. We too often use that as an excuse to not give a hand to those who could really benefit from our Christian love and help.

I'm pretty certain that Joseph - after having been sold to slave traders passing through the area - had no idea of what to expect in Egypt. Similarly, none of us traveling with Bishop Reddall was exactly sure what to expect in Kenya. But as it turned out, we probably each learned things to support our own spiritual journeys, and how we as Episcopalians collectively have much that we could learn from our African brothers and sisters.

I for example fully anticipated to experience culture-clash rather profoundly, and realized beforehand that I may even have to confront deeply-held issues of racism and "other-ness" that I try to tell myself I don't really harbor deep within. But I'm too much a product of my upbringing not to have retained some of it.

Whether we like it or not, many of us (if not "most" of us) hold thoughts of bias toward others, whether that is in the form of racism, sexism, able-ism, or feelings of economic superiority (for example toward people who live on the street). I was forced to reflect on some of my own personal biases as I read and re-read this morning's Gospel from Matthew.

The story of the Canaanite woman who approached Jesus can be and probably should be viewed thru the lens of racism. Jesus was in the area of Tyre and Sidon - gentile, not Jewish, territory. And who were the Canaanites? They were the indigenous people of the region. We sometimes forget that. Remember that when the Israelites came up out of Egypt, they essentially committed genocide against the Canaanite people who lived in the land, very similar to what happened to our own indigenous people when white settlers came to North America.

And how does Jesus respond to her, this indigenous woman? This woman whose civilization had been completely displaced? Frankly, with straight-up racism, likening her to a "dog."

We have to be honest with ourselves and admit that this episode (which appears in both Matthew and Mark) presents Jesus as a complete and total jerk. Various preachers thru the years have tried to convince us that these harsh words meant something else. But they don't.

And remember that in the first part of this morning's reading, Jesus had just been talking about the "hypocrisy" of the Pharisees! And now, who is the one being a hypocrite?

When we remind ourselves that we believe Jesus to be both fully human and fully divine, that HUMAN part really surfaces here in an instant, along with all the cultural baggage He's carried with him His whole life. Just as it does for many of us. Jesus automatically looks down on this woman, simply because of her race, her "other-ness." And Jesus - our Jesus - Jesus who loves everyone - simply doesn't want to help her. She isn't the right kind of people.

What exactly does it feel like for us to recognize that we worship a flawed Jesus?

We need to remind ourselves here that this isn't an isolated incident in scripture. Sometimes even God gets it wrong. In the Old Testament, for instance, God - after reflecting on it a while - regrets having sent the Flood that destroyed all but Noah and his family, and then places a bow in the sky to represent a promise never to do it again. And in another place God openly regrets having chosen Saul to lead the people. The God we worship, it seems, doesn't get it right the first time in every instance.

And here we have a similar example; even Jesus didn't make the best choices all of the time, succumbing here to cultural biases He would have been hearing His entire life.

But what we also have here is a rather magnificent teaching from Jesus. Yes, He falls back on the racism His society has taught Him, but when the Canaanite woman calls Him on it, what does He do?

Does he dig his heels in and double-down? Deny His own racism? Try to defend Himself by saying, "Some of my best friends are Canaanites!" Not at all. He rethinks it. He invites it in as an opportunity for self-reflection. He thinks again, recognizes that He is in the wrong, and makes a change on the spot.

Scripture calls Jesus "the Way" and in this instance He is showing us the way that we can overcome our own tendencies to treat anyone who is different from us in a way that is un-Godly and un-Christian.

It has been said that we are never responsible for our first thought; but we are responsible for our second thought and our first action. Jesus' second thought was to help this woman, this child of God, His sister in the Kingdom of God, and His first action was to help her.

This is frankly one of my favorite passages of scripture. I learn from it that even Jesus "had His moments." But that rather than living into those moments He likely wasn't proud of, he learned from them, re-thought them, and took action to change them. This passage marks a transformative moment in Jesus' ministry on earth. A moment in which He realized that His mission was not only to the Jewish people, but to all of humanity. And - based on that second thought - he took a first action.

Following this turning point, Jesus' ministry shifts. We all know of the earlier feeding of the 5,000 - likely to a group of Jesus' Jewish followers. But later in Matthew, we have another feeding - this time to 4,000. Given the geography of where Jesus was at the time, it is likely the feeding of the 4,000 was not to Jewish followers, but to gentiles, possibly even including indigenous Canaanites. Thanks to the persistent confrontation from this unnamed Canaanite woman, Jesus' ministry was broadened to include everyone He encountered. And that of course includes all of us.

This episode should raise for us the question: what do we do when we take an honest hard look at ourselves and encounter biases toward any group or individual? Do we dig in our heels and cling to our position? Do we deny that we have any bias? Or do we choose the way of Jesus, do some self-reflection, and form a second thought before taking that first all-important action?

Amen.