
Jesus, Laffy Taffy, and the Best ‘Worst’ Thing

A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
Proper 20 – Year B

It was Easter Day 2013. Our daughter was just a few months old, our son was two and a half—which really tells you pretty much all you need to know. The four of us—the children, my husband and I—made it through church and lunch relatively unscathed, then we posed for the requisite photos by the azaleas, and took part in several egg hunts. By 3 o’clock, everyone was sacked out for an afternoon nap. Or so we thought. Turns out the toddler had only pretended to snooze, then had climbed out of his crib and busied himself unwrapping every last piece of candy in his Easter basket. When we found him, he was plastered in chocolate from head to toe and had Twizzlers sticking out of his ears and nose. We had to cut the Laffy Taffy from his hair in great banana scented globs. Needless to say, the rest of the day passed on an epic sugar high. By bedtime, my husband and I had had all we could take. And so as Jack wrestled our son into his pajamas, he looked him in the eye and announced sternly in his best Angry Dad Voice, “Sanders, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. Now what’s it going to be?” To which Sanders replied emphatically, “The hard way, the hard way!”

Young children are unpredictable and messy. Which is why I get just a tad bit nervous whenever Jesus uses them as a sermon illustration. Take this morning’s gospel lesson. After breaking up a skirmish among his followers regarding which one of them is going to be named “Disciple of the Year,” Jesus draws a little kid into his arms and proclaims: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” At first glance, this seems like one of Jesus’ more innocuous teachings. Being in relationship with Jesus, it appears to suggest, is about embracing someone who is sweet and easy to love—someone who settles down comfortably with you, seeking little more than a pat on the back and a bottle of warm milk before nodding off to sleep. And so I think to myself, *Okay, uh-huh, I can do that. Come on over, Jesus, make yourself at home.* But then I remember how it is when sweet little children wake up. They do wake up, after all, and even if they don’t get into all the Easter candy right away, it’s clear that the peace and quiet is over. The peace and quiet is over, and the disruption has begun. This is just the way it is. Being in relationship with a child means being in relationship with the whole child, the parts that are easy to love and the parts that, well—the parts that interrupt you, inconvenience you, and tick you off; the parts that ask more of you than you think you have to give. In the same way, being in relationship with Jesus means being in relationship with the whole Jesus—not just the sweet, comforting parts that are easy to embrace but also the unpredictable, offensive, occasionally frightening, parts that ask difficult, well nigh impossible, things of you.

Think for a moment about some of Jesus’ more shocking, more outrageous teachings, pronouncements like the one in today’s gospel: *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.* Or how about this humdinger: *Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.* Then, there are the Beatitudes: *Blessed are you who are poor . . . Blessed are you who weep . . . Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you and defame you . . .* And also: *You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*

This is all deeply disruptive, unsettling stuff. It’s as if a kid who was supposed to be napping has instead gotten up, pulled all the toys off the shelves, and scattered them across the floor. Nothing is where we expect it to be anymore. Nothing looks like what we remember. It’s a profoundly discombobulating thing. And yet, according to this morning’s gospel lesson, this is life with Jesus. This is life in the Kingdom of God. Unpredictable. Uncontrollable. Quite honestly, a bit of a mess.

Which actually strikes me as pretty good news—really good news, in fact, because so much of our lives is a mess these days. So much of our time is spent doing things “the hard way.” If you’re like me, this can sometimes make you feel off the chart crazy. But Jesus is not put off by it. Jesus is not put off by the mess. On the contrary, he is used to it. He does much of his best work in it. Jesus meets us here today, smack dab in the middle of all the chaos and confusion—all the stuff that’s been going on that’s so difficult we could never in a million years have imagined it. Jesus embraces us, he pulls us to him right here, right now, messy and wrung out though we are. Jesus enfolds us right here in this chaotic, topsy-turvy space where no one else wants to be, where our lives have been upended, where nothing has gone as we’d hoped or expected. This is Jesus’ natural habitat, this catastrophically messy place. So much so that, in scripture, Jesus often tells his followers to be on the lookout for him precisely when things reach the breaking point of chaos and disorder, whenever it seems like they just cannot go on. At this point, Jesus says, “Stand up and raise your heads, for your salvation is near” (Luke 21:28). Your salvation is near—though it may be arriving in a way you could never have predicted and certainly would not have chosen.

Will Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, tells of a conversation he once had with the mother of a profoundly handicapped child. Before she gave birth to her child, this woman had enjoyed a brilliant and lucrative business career. She was on track for a big promotion when her mentally and physically challenged baby arrived. Following the baby’s birth, she began devoting her days not to closing deals but to trying to open up her child’s world. In her heart, the young mother knew that she would never return to the workplace she used to find so challenging and meaningful. Willimon asked her how it was that she could care for her child so patiently and embrace her so completely when she had had to give up so much, when her life had been so radically disrupted. To which the mother replied simply, “My daughter is the best ‘worst thing’ that has ever happened to me. I could not have planned for her. Quite frankly, I would not have chosen her. And yet the truth is that she has saved me.

I wonder which of the disruptions facing us right now might ultimately save us? I wonder. We can try to cope with the chaos all around us and within us by ignoring it, by pretending somehow that it doesn’t exist. We can succumb to bitterness, anger, fear, regret, and hatred. We can do things the “hard way,” digging our heels in and becoming more and more entrenched in our own biases and perspectives. Or we can open ourselves to the unexpected, unbidden, and even unwanted. We can look, among the messy rubble of our old lives to find the pattern of something beautiful and new. We can do this. We can do this. Who knows? We may just stumble upon “the best ‘worst’ thing” that has ever happened to us.