
'Loving Reproofs that Leave No Hurt'

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 18 – Year B

In the name of God, 'our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend' (The Hymnal 388 v.5). Amen.

I've been trying to decide whether I've been doing theological research this summer by watching so much television, or if I've just been binge watching and indulging in that. I'm intrigued by a new TV series about the life of Jesus called *The Chosen*. And it's unique because it's a multi-season series: seven seasons are planned, and they filmed two seasons so far. There are eight episodes in each season, and they're working on filming the third season right now. I've been enchanted by the way in which it humanizes our Lord, particularly by the use of humor. I'm going to share some of that humor with you and see what you think. If you've seen it, you might know what I mean already, by the way it makes Him more accessible to us, more like us, but in a way that still is reverent.

The first example I have for you occurs when two of the disciples are represented in a prequel to *The Chosen* season. The two disciples are arm wrestling, having some fun in a casual moment. The disciple named Thaddeus is favored to win, and he's arm wrestling with Andrew. Jesus and the other disciples are watching. And then, surprisingly, Andrew wins. And Jesus says, "Even I didn't see that one coming."

Another example occurs actually during one of the episodes in the first season of *The Chosen*, and it features the wedding at Cana. That's the story of the famous wedding where Jesus turns water into wine. But before that happens, there's a relaxed moment when a conversation occurs among the disciples and Jesus about anticipating dancing at the wedding. One of the disciples remarks about Andrew, "Well, when it comes to dancing, Andrew has four left feet," and Jesus says, "What do you mean by that?" And the disciple says, "Well, when he tries to dance, he looks like a donkey walking on hot coals." Then along with Andrew they all get a good laugh about that.

But later, after Jesus has performed the miracle and turned water into wine, and wine is flowing and everyone is appropriately inebriated, the music has started and they're all dancing, one of the disciples calls out to Jesus over the music. "Well, are you going to help Andrew with his feet?" And Jesus responds, shouting back, "There are some things even I cannot do." And once again, there's that expression "Even I."

Well, here's my effort at theological research. How do you humanize our Lord, who is portrayed as our tradition requires: as exalted, as the Messiah, as the holy one of God, the son of God? How do you dramatically portray him as someone like us, human like us, in a way that viewers can connect, and in the way that we're used to connecting with characters in stories? How do you bring Jesus back from this kind of pedestal of lofty, cosmic grandeur and make him accessible in a way that people can make the human connection, especially in our time when those kinds of connections are so needed?

I think they've got it right. I think they've figured out a formula, a lighthearted way to have Jesus say things like "Even I" but still portray him reverently as the tradition requires. Now, there's a third example that uses a different kind of tactic or ploy. See what you think about this one. This is about the disciples getting ready to go on a mission. It's the mission that ends up in Samaria with the woman at the well, as you may recall that story. As they're getting ready, Jesus notices that Simon Peter, his chief disciple, seems distracted, and asks him,

"Simon, what troubles you?"

Simon says, "I think I'm just excited for the trip."

And Jesus says to him, "You know, you can tell me the truth."

Simon says, "You're telling me you don't already know what's in my head?"

Jesus says, "Well, that's a conversation for another time."

And finally, Simon gets around to saying, "My wife will be alone with her mother."

Now, you may recall this story as well. It's the story of Simon Peter's mother-in-law ill on her sick bed, and there's concern about her recovering. Jesus eventually heals her. But in this scene that hasn't happened yet, and so Simon's mind is pulled to that concern, that anxiety. So he says, "My wife will be alone with her mother."

Jesus responds, "And you're scared that things could get worst and you wouldn't be there."

Then Simon says, "See, that's what I mean. You already know anyway."

And Jesus responds, "Simon, everyone here knows what you're thinking most of the time. It doesn't take God's wisdom."

Then Jesus looks around at the other disciples, and they're all nodding their heads, assenting to the idea that, 'Yes, most of the time we know what's going on in Simon Peter's head.' Even Peter himself smiles with the kind of recognition that shows that he gets it: that he's among friends, that he belongs in a community where people know him and care enough about him to understand what's going on with him, and that he can rely on that. And that it doesn't take supernatural, miraculous power to care about him, to see what's important to him.

Now, I like to call that kind of challenge that Jesus issues to Peter—"You can tell me the truth. It doesn't take God's wisdom to know what's going on with you. Everybody here can understand what's up for you"—I like to call that "Loving reproof that leaves no hurt." Loving reproof that leaves no hurt.

I came across the expression in a book of daily devotionals called *God Calling*. It's edited by A.J. Russell, but it's really the words of two women who spent years praying together and in their conversations getting messages from our Lord; messages they archived and that Russell arranged for devotional reading. In the book's introduction they said that some of the messages had this character: they were 'loving reproofs that leave no hurt.'

I'm impressed with the episode I just described in which Jesus does just that with Simon Peter: 'reproves' him in a way that he need not and does not experience as criticizing, as judging, as blaming or condemning, or needling or attacking him. It's a way that reproves him but does not hurt him; does not injure his pride, his ego, his dignity. And something like that happens in today's gospel. The Gentile woman has been rejected by Jesus and her request that he come and heal her demon-possessed daughter. And the way Jesus does this is that he says, 'I've come to my own people. That is my mission. And it's not fair to give the children's food to dogs.' (Mark 7:27)

Now I'm one of those preachers who believes that, in that remark, Jesus commits an ethnic slur. Here he actually—yes—makes a prejudicial remark about the Gentile woman and her people; he uses a stereotype that shows bias. At the same time, he's right about his calling and his commission. And so, she finds a way forward in her remark as she says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs under the master's table." She finds a deft way, an agile way, to reprove him in a way that leaves no hurt. And Jesus responds accordingly, as if he's thinking, "Even I didn't see that one coming." The scripture says that Jesus says to her, "For saying that, go your way, your daughter has been healed." (Mark 7:29)

He gets it: that something remarkable has happened here, that he's been challenged. And I think it's the kind of challenge that we hear about in our epistle today from James, in which James says that in the way that you show favor to this or that person, be careful not to show *favoritism*. As he puts it, "My sisters and brothers, do you, with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus?" (James 2:1) Jesus represents for us this inclusivity, this way to, yes, announce what we are called to do, what's right about our mission, right about our perspectives, but in a way that does not show favoritism, that's not partiality. (James 2:9) It's about finding a way to widen the circle, to include others, to expand the kingdom, to come up higher.

Isn't that what we're sorely in need of today? Isn't that the gospel good news that we're waiting to hear from each other? Isn't that the gospel good news that the world is waiting to hear from the church? How can we all find a way to be right about our mission, our commission, our calling, to be on the right side of history about some issues, or on the right side of God, or the right side of social science, regarding the familiar issues we're all used to hearing about?—immigrants, abortion, gun control, vaccinations, the economy, the climate

emergency, and military actions. How can we find a way to be right in the way that we think we're right, but in a way that also makes room for others, widens the circle, expands the kingdom?

Now, you may not be able to believe that our Lord had moments in which he said to himself, "Even I didn't see that one coming," or "That's something that even I can't do," but I pray that you're able to hear our Lord offering us loving reproofs that leave no hurt, in all the ways that we may be right about this or that issue, but are also called to expand community, also called to be right in ways that call us up higher, in ways that call us to widen the circle, so that everyone gets to belong.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

*"His loving reproofs would leave no hurt." Introduction, *God Calling*, edited by A.J. Russell (1935)

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