
Like Children in Marketplaces

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 9 – Year A

In the name of God: Our Creator, Redeemer, and Advocate. Amen.

Jesus said to the crowd, “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,

‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ (Matthew 11:16-17)

As we’ve already heard, those two verses are from today’s parable. In a few minutes I want to connect them with a contemporary parable. But first, let’s begin with Jesus’ parable about the children in the marketplace. I want to share with you what I’ve learned about that parable since I first heard it growing up in Sunday school. I remember that it used to be called—and maybe some of you remember this too—it used to be called, ‘The Parable of the Peevish Children.’ But it’s not really about the children, is it? The moral of the story, or it’s ‘takeaway, is not, ‘Don’t be a peeved or peevish child.’ It’s really about us adults going around and acting-out as if we were children, right? Don’t be *like* a peeved or peevish child; that’s the real point, isn’t it? And here’s the dictionary definition of that word, ‘peeved:’ “A feeling or mood of resentment.” “A feeling or mood of resentment.”

Wow! Do we have a lot of peeved adults in our world today! And I don’t mean just **one** generation of peeved adults: it’s not just *my* generation of ‘baby boomers;’ although we are as loud as we ‘wanna be’ in the public arena. Rather, there is among us nowadays a ‘feeling or mood of resentment’ that is so widespread, so ubiquitous, so contagious—that it makes prisoners of more than one generation. It’s more like we’re intergenerationally peeved. It’s a trans-generational peevishness, wouldn’t you agree; from ‘baby boomers’ like me to the younger adults among us, I dare say.

But let me be careful not to point-the-finger at any particular group of us here today. You know how that goes: there’s nothing to be gained by ‘outing’ somebody, as we say, or putting anyone ‘on the spot.’ And after all, I’m a Southerner. That means I default to being ‘nice,’ right?—even **to** a fault. You know what we were taught: *If you can’t say anything nice . . . ; If you can’t say anything nice . . . ; come on . . . Don’t say anything at all.* That’s right: I’m in the right place here today. *My people! My people!*

But sometimes—O my people, my people—sometimes you’ve just got to say something about what you see going on around you; right? Sometimes you’ve just got to ‘speak truth to power,’ as they say. And that can create a double-bind for us ‘niceness’ people. Some of us would rather be able to say something like, ‘Oh,

bless their heart.' You, know, just keep a little civility going, right?

Now as your representative Southerner here today, I've learned a little strategy for this. It's my best practice for maintaining some civility and politeness, while at the same time indulging in some truth telling. I've found that, if we nice people refer to ourselves most of all—you know, tell the truth on ourselves more than on anyone else—well, then maybe we can get a few other people to nod their heads and admit something like, "I resemble that remark." You know, as Groucho Marx said famously: instead of, 'I *resent* that remark.' So in a few minutes I'll try to be *self*-critical, and let's see how that play's out here today; by the grace of God.

Speaking of God, that brings me to the second parable I want to share today. You've likely heard it told as a 'parable of a drowned believer.' But I'm going to tell it as 'the parable of the drowned preacher;' just to keep 'outing myself'—as I said—outing myself as your preacher here today.

It's the story of a preacher whose church got caught in a great flood; a flood that was overwhelming the whole town. As the water level was rising, he took his stand on the front porch of the church and prayed to God to deliver him. Then one of the townspeople came by in a canoe, and said, 'Get in, Preacher. We gotta get outa here.' But the preacher said, 'No, I'm staying right here. I have faith God's gonna rescue me.' So, the canoe paddler went on by.

Next, the water level rose to the church balcony. And then someone else came by in a motorboat and called out, 'Come on, Preacher. Grab a hold of this rope and we'll get you outa here.' But once again the preacher stood firm. 'Don't worry about me, y'all. *God's got me!*' So the motorboat went on by too.

Finally the water rose up to the steeple. The preacher was perched up there with the cross, when a helicopter came by and a state trooper shouted out, 'Grab the ladder, Preacher! This is your last chance to get help, sir.' But a third time the preacher exclaimed, 'The Lord's gonna save me. Just you wait and see.'

Of course, the preacher dies, and goes to heaven—thank God for that. The first chance he gets, he turns to St. Peter and exclaims, 'But sir, I never stopped believing. Why didn't I get saved from that flood?' And St. Peter answers, 'My son, we sent you a canoe, a motorboat, and a helicopter. Why didn't you get in?'

Well, that's the modern day parable that you've likely heard before. It's fun to tell it today because it has a similar form as the parable we hear in today's gospel:

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

And to make it plain, a similar structure in the contemporary parable would be:

We sent two boats for you, and you wouldn't get in; we sent a helicopter for you, and you rejected that too.[\[1\]](#)

But let's have a little fun here. That parable is most often told as a way of expressing the tension between two different perspectives: the tension between saying, 'God helps those who accept God's help in ordinary, naturalistic ways' on the one hand, versus saying, 'God helps those who look for God's help in extraordinary, supernatural ways.' But why not both? Why not live into the tension: learning when to accept God's help on the ordinary, human level, and also when to expect God to show up in extraordinary, even supernatural ways? And that's true to our tradition as Anglicans or Episcopalians: affirming *both* faith and reason.

So coming back to me as the preacher in that contemporary parable, I might play devil's advocate. I say that ironically, I hope you appreciate. I might play devil's advocate, and pushback on the St. Peter portrayed in that story.

Wha-d'ya mean, you sent two boats and a helicopter? Did you run out of angels? You couldn't send an angel?

Wha-d'ya mean, you sent two boats and a helicopter? You mean you couldn't spare a few saints out of heaven to give me a hand?

Wha-d'ya mean, you sent two boats and a helicopter? You wouldn't give time off to one of my relatives, or scout out anybody else in all of heaven, to answer my prayer and save me that way?

Wha-d'ya mean, you sent two boats and a helicopter? Is that all you got?

You see what I mean? Now we're getting to a peeved preacher who can also pushback; pushback with some theology, right? And that brings us to *me* being a 'peeved preacher' in today's social context, who can also do some pushback. Now you get to indulge *me*, as I hinted before. This is the part where you get to see *me* revealed like one of those peeved children in the marketplaces of our country. Here's my 'pet peeve,' in this very peevish season of our lives in these United States. This is where I get to exclaim:

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

Here it is; wait for it:

We tried being 'woke' with you and did not dance;
we tried being 'unwoke' and you did not mourn.

Now, you wouldn't have any reason to know this, but that term 'woke' goes all the way back to the 1930s. That's right: the phrase, "stay woke," emerged among African Americans as a slang term to mean 'waking-up' to the issues of race in our society. But not just waking-up one group of people against another. Becoming 'woke' was a call to people on *both* sides of the racial divide. You can hear an echo of that appeal to both sides some three decades later in a prophetic declaration by the writer, James Baldwin. In 1963, in his collection of essays called, *The Fire Next Time*, he wrote the following poignant appeal to his fellow citizens, black and white. "If we," he wrote:

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—[if we] do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.

—James Baldwin, [The Fire Next Time](#) (1963)

www.goodreads.com/quotes/774173-if-we--and-now-i-mean-the-relatively-conscious-whites.

That was Baldwin's hope in 1963. That's the way he wrote as a "prisoner of hope," to quote the last verse of our Old Testament reading appointed for today from the prophet Zechariah (9:12). Calling for "relatively conscious whites," he also appealed to "relatively conscious blacks" to be 'woke' together with them, and then co-create a new consciousness among the others, that together we might re-create our country. That's how

'wokeness' evolved in its original, ethnic context among African Americans. I would dare say that in that context it was a civic equivalent of our Christian love ethic, as Baldwin expressed it when he appealed to us: 'like lovers,' as he said poignantly—'like lovers, to insist on a relative consciousness among ourselves, that we might co-create among that consciousness others.'

Wokeness as kind of consciousness, then; as a way of being awake to solidarity with others; that's the way the term developed in its own context. You can imagine how peeved I am therefore, and how grieved as a child of that era, who became a young adult in the sixties, to hear the term misused and abused, whether by people on one side or the other side, of our culture wars; people who use the term to mean something exactly the opposite of its intended appeal; the appeal to 'achieve our country' and to 'change history.' It's in that context, and from that perspective, that to be 'unwoke' is to be relatively *unconscious* of the solidarity that binds us to one another as co-citizens, as human beings like each other, and as partners in a shared commonwealth. And for that relative degree of unconsciousness we should rightly mourn, as if to say:

We tried being 'woke' with you and did not dance; we tried being 'unwoke' and you did not mourn.

But here today—here today in this community of faith, we have something we *can* dance for, as love-slaves of Jesus Christ, so to speak. Here today we have Jesus calling all of us—in, through, and beyond our culture wars, on whatever side of our cultural divides that we find ourselves. Hear today we get to hear a different tune, or to wail for a different failure, than the ones that are calling out to us in the marketplaces.

For Jesus said:

"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants . . .

For today's gospel does not end with 'peeved children' or their adult counterparts. Rather it ends with Christians who are 'children of light,' as Jesus calls us to be: childlike and naïve enough to actually practice Jesus' love ethic; the ethic of loving one's enemies, the ethic of praying for those who persecute us, and the ethic of not returning evil for evil.

And returning now to now to my personal disclosure, transparency and vulnerability: Jesus' good news does not leave me in the lurch; does *not* leave me with a double-bind of being a pacifist-aggressive—ha ha!—when I get peeved with those whose views differ from mine. Rather, like St. Paul in our epistle reading for today, I get to "delight in the law of God in my inmost self," even at the same time that "I see in my members another law at war with [that law], making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:22-25a).

Yes indeed, in Jesus we are—each and every one of us—provided with an amazing, miraculous, and gracious breakthrough; as Jesus promises when he appeals to us:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take *my* yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you *will* find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Yes, instead of succumbing to being 'peeved about people who are peeved about us,' let us together embrace the One who empowers us to seek solidarity instead. And then, by the supernatural grace of God, we may be able to achieve our Collect appointed for today; as we pray:

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The Collect: Sunday, July 9, 2023

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APPENDIX

From Wikipedia: “Woke is an adjective derived from **African-American Vernacular English** (AAVE) meaning ‘alert to racial prejudice and discrimination.’ . . .

“The phrase ‘stay woke’ has history in AAVE as far back as the 1930s, in some contexts referring to an awareness of the social and political issues affecting African Americans . . .

“The term emerged in the 2010s and, increasingly, it also meant not only racial consciousness but also that of gender as well as other discriminated identities, originally in the American context... As it spread internationally [it] was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2017 . . .

“By 2020, however, members of the political center and right wing in several Western countries were using the term woke in an ironic way, as an insult for various progressive or leftist movements and ideologies perceived as overzealous, performative, or insincere . . . Some commentators came to consider it an offensive term with negative associations [referring] to those who promote political ideas involving identity and race.” Excerpted from Wikipedia at <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke>.

By contrast to the negative use of the terms, ‘wokeness’ or ‘woke mob,’ you can find the following use of such terms posted on my blogsite: <https://ourtrueselves.com/2023/05/02/from-woke-to-un-woke-and-re-woke/>

[1] Jesus uses the parable to compare people hearing John the Baptist and not believing him, to children wailing and people not mourning (their sins and repenting)—that is, not being converted by John as a prophet who railed against people’s sins and transgressions (= harsh news or judgment). Then Jesus compares people hearing himself and not believing, to children playing a flute and people not dancing (or rejoicing at good news)—that is, not being converted by Jesus as a prophet who forgave people their sins and transgressions (= good news or the ‘gospel’).