

August 20, 2017
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 15, Year A, RCL
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Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2z, 29-32
Matthew 15:10-28

In a change of pace, I'm going to begin this sermon with a catechetical moment. This summer, instead of printing the words of the entire service in the bulletin, we're using the physical *Book of Common Prayer*. This book contains practically everything you need to know about being an Episcopalian. If you read closely, it contains a whole lot of theology.

What we call a "collect" is a prayer that encapsulates a particular prayer intention. Our service begins with the "collect of the day," which summarizes the overall theme of the day.

Let's go back to the collect of the day for today, which is near the beginning of your bulletin. It's also in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Today we're using the prayers and readings for Proper 15 for the season after Pentecost. Turn to page 232, and you can see the prayer for Proper 15. Hopefully it's the same one that's in your bulletin. Notice at the bottom of the page that this section of the *Prayer Book* is titled, "Collects: Contemporary."

We've already heard that prayer, so let's go to a different section, called "Collects: Traditional." These are the same prayers but with "thee, thou, and thy" language. The language is beautiful and sometimes helps us to hear the prayer differently. So turn to page 180 and again look for Proper 15, which is at the bottom of the page. It goes like this:

Almighty God, who hast given thy only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavor ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."

Last week, I liked that aphorism. This week, I'm not so sure. I generally share the Transcendentalists' positive view of human nature. But sometimes I wonder. Let's hear it again: "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." Rather than flowing from the pen of Emerson, imagine that spewing from the mouth of David Duke. If he's being himself, I kind of wish he wouldn't.¹

I was raised in Louisiana, David Duke's home state. I had many reactions to last weekend's events in Charlottesville, including revulsion upon simply hearing Duke's name. The last time this former Grand Dragon of the KKK was prominently in the news was back in 1991, when he ran for Governor of Louisiana. He actually made it to the runoff, in which he suffered a "landslide" loss. It may have been a two-man landslide, but he still won 39 percent of the vote, a fact that remains appalling to me to this day. My own grandfather was an enthusiastic supporter, along with many members of my extended family. They would probably vote for him even today. During the governor's election Duke renounced his past racism and anti-Semitism. At some point since then he must have renounced his renunciation. I never believed it anyway. If being himself means being an outrageous bigot, then maybe he should try being someone else. And if he wants to be someone else, he might start by re-reading the Gospel of Matthew.

Let's set the stage. To imagine life for average Jews in first-century Palestine, it might help to picture life for ultra-Orthodox Jews today. Taken individually, the unfamiliar particularities may just seem inexplicably peculiar. But they are best interpreted as a whole: through guidelines for behaviors large and small, mundane acts are ritualized, and the physical becomes the spiritual.

When we talk about first-century Palestine, these guidelines as a whole are called the Jewish "purity codes." Today's two Gospel stories allude to some of them: instructions about what food may be eaten and how it must be prepared, and rules about associating with non-Jews and with women. Individual purity is important, because the group is only as pure as the individuals who compose it. In theory, communal purity would maintain God's favor for the Hebrews and prepare the way for the messiah. In effect, this set the Hebrew people apart, gathering and strengthening their beleaguered community.

The Gospel of Matthew was written down long after Jesus' death. By then Matthew's community must have understood that Jesus' Good News was meant for everyone. Perhaps Matthew's community already included Jews *and* gentiles who together were following Jesus. This would have presented practical challenges. Jews who strictly adhered to the purity codes would have found it difficult to associate closely with gentiles. Gentiles wanting simply to follow Jesus would have found it exceedingly burdensome to try and be Jews first. Besides, the Messiah had already come. Under such circumstances, the purity codes would no longer serve to gather and strengthen the community. Perhaps instead they would separate and weaken.

Remember, Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels; the life of Jesus is located firmly in the Hebrew practices of the day. Jesus *must* understand the implications of what he is saying and doing. Jesus proclaims that those at the bottom rise to the top, and that outsiders become insiders. Jesus tempers the purity codes; he declines to police the boundaries of separation that ultimately weaken the community. In today's reading and elsewhere, we see in Matthew a Jesus who is both devoutly Jewish *and* radically inclusive.

In the first story, Jesus redefines purity, saying, "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." It seems pretty clear that if he was speaking today, his list of defilements in the heart would include racism and anti-Semitism and even sexism. In the second story, Jesus at first fails his own test established just before. Thanks to that courageous person—an outsider as both gentile and woman—he gets second chance, the extra nudge that pushes him out of his comfort zone and beyond his own prejudices.

It's not hard to hear echoes of Charlottesville in today's Gospel reading. If Jesus himself is at the same time *devoutly Jewish* and *radically inclusive*, there would seem to be little justification for Christians who are anti-Semitic or racist. Especially in light of today's readings from Matthew, their shouts for cultural and racial purity ring dangerously worse than hollow. And no matter what those far-right marchers chant, the halls of power in America are still dominated by Christian white men—heterosexual, cis-gendered ones at that.

Those at the far right would benefit from taking a cue from the heterosexual, cis-gendered, Christian white men sitting here. Even *you* have had to throw off certain cultural handcuffs, in order to claim you selves as gentle men. Privilege is relative, and most of us here enjoy at least a large dollop of it. In general, we should wear it lightly, putting it aside like capital in the bank, and letting it grow. I think it's just about time for us to start spending it.

In Ralph Waldo Emerson's day, Christian theology cast human nature as essentially fallen. Emerson rejected that perspective. That's why he could write, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." Emerson lived through and personally saw the evil of slavery and the immense human cost of the Civil War. But he never changed his mind about humanity's essential goodness. I'm with Emerson. No matter how much I doubt, I always return to this: our all-powerful God ultimately redeems *all* things. Therefore every person is a child of God; every person deserves the chance to be them self; every person can live in the light of God's Spirit.

Even though I loathe to admit it, that goes even for David Duke. I like to think that Duke is but a nagging mosquito to a God who has very different plans for him some day. In response to the tiki torches of hatred, did you see that photo from Charlottesville of the sea of candles?² Jesus didn't stay in his comfort zone; neither should we. Be aware of those ugly marchers. But focus on those glimpses of essential goodness. Love will grow in *your* heart and flow forth from *your* body. You might even find that your comfort zone travels with you—not as a wall for separation, but as a blanket for sharing.

Let's briefly return to the *Book of Common Prayer*. I'll let you decide on your own whether this sermon had anything to do with the collect of the day. Right now I want to point out that, besides a collect for every Sunday, there are collects for special occasions or just for your praying use. One is particular fitting for today. It's the "Collect for Social Justice" on page 260. [BCP, 260] Please turn to page 260, and find collect 21, "For Social Justice." Let's say it together.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, who created us in your image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Notes

¹ To see David Duke in action at the Charlottesville white supremacy gathering on August 12-13, 2017, watch the excellent August 14, 2017, episode of HBO's VICE News Tonight, "Charlottesville: Race and Terror," available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RlrcB1sAN8I> (accessed August 19, 2017).

² See for example Nicole Chavez, "With Candles, not Torches, Charlottesville Takes Back the Light," CNN News online, August 17, 2017, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/17/us/uva-charlottesville-then-now/> (accessed August 19, 2017)