



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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GENESIS 45:1-15; PSALM 133; ROMANS 11:1-2a, 29-32; MATTHEW 15: 10-28

THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF TRIBALISM

Matthew 15: 10-28 [Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.]

Have you noticed how tribalistic we have become in modernity?

Wanting to move from just being frustrated by endless news cycles offering cascades of despairing reports, I've been digging down into the neurobiological and historical roots of our tribal tendencies,

trying to better understand our current predicament. I've even been dipping into the astrobiological question, what defines "life" (more on that in the footnotes).

It is fascinating reading, prompting reflection that honestly has helped me take a few steps back from my impulse to

jump on the “us versus them” wagon without regard for another’s perspective.

In light of today’s gospel, when we get a Jesus who, on engagement with the Canaanite woman, does not seem to be the Jesus we’ve come to know and love, or even really like, I’d like to share some of my gleanings.

Jesus is trekking to the borderlands of familiarity, presumably to teach his disciples some important lessons, we being his disciples, too. He leaves Gennesaret, which is already on the outskirts of social comfort zone, across the Sea of Galilee, where Jews and non-Jews intermingle, far flung from the hallowed halls of Jerusalem.

He moves north into the region of Tyre and Sidon, present-day Lebanon, where few, if any, Jews live. We don’t know why he goes there, but he does, and he is now thoroughly in the land of the Canaanites, Israel’s bitter enemy. It was decided long before that they could not live together. He could not have known the Canaanite woman as anything but the despised and distrusted “other.” His apparent disdain for her would have made political and social sense in his day.

If we go further back in human history, the neurobiology of tribalism runs deep in our veins. We humans are social creatures, ill-equipped to survive on our own. It turns out we have a very effective evolutionary adaptation that orients to tribal instincts:

we hang with those aligned with ourselves; we inherently distrust those who don’t. Much of this is subconscious. There is actually a “coefficient of relationship” which guides the notion of kinship—the more genes we share, the more likely we are to orient to them, and draw them closer. Over time, this orbit of kinship led to living together, eating together, and eventually helped establish agriculture, shared goods and services, forged political alliances and what we now call “civilization.”

The term tribe is from the Latin *tribus*—literally, the ancient Roman administrative precinct in which voting cohorts were held. There was no value judgment invested in the term.

Centuries later, as European countries embraced the expansionist sprint to colonize the globe, the word was applied indiscriminately and pejoratively to any clan or collective of people the colonizers judged to be “barbarians.”

From there, the binaries of moral superiority between “us and them” set us up for the modern zero-sum game we see sweeping all aspects of our social constructs. For me to win, you must lose. And you deserve to lose. The dogs under the table are not worthy to eat my children’s crumbs.

Neurobiology made it easy to do.

But the derivative effects informed by it are disastrous—echo chambers, isolation

and loneliness, manufactured fear...these translate fairly readily to justification for racism and xenophobia, mass deportations, indentured slavery, trafficking, pogroms, wars, even genocides. Humans have always had capacity for this range of evil, but we now play the zero-sum game on a global level, with a scale of catastrophic proportion.

Which brings me to the second aspect of neurobiology that factors into this: our brains do not do well with large collections. We naturally create taxonomies, divisions, and boundaries to establish some sense of order.

We don't know what to do with a global population of 8 billion, but how many people live in your home or in your building or on your block?

We have a hard time conjuring that we have 4 million people living in metropolitan Seattle, but can you rally around a sports team that represents the region and feel some connection with all those others as you do?

We can't comprehend that more than 100 million people have died in wars in the past century, but do you somehow remember that 49 people died a decade ago in the Pulse nightclub shooting?

Again, neurobiology made it easy to do. We categorize and create boundaries to make sense of our world.

We do it in the natural order of things as well. There are some 8.7 million species of living things on earth, but we can't really make any sense of that number, so do you remember what we did: we created a taxonomy of living things: Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species. Nothing inherently bad in that, but the results have been ruinous. By seeing homo sapiens as distinct from plants and animals, we convinced ourselves that we were separate from the rest of the creatures of this world, and somehow superior.

And if we take this one step further, this is where it really gets interesting...

Political theorist Jane Bennett has written a book entitled *Vibrant Matter* in which she critiques the traditional ordering of creation into "vibrant life" (comprised of living beings) and dull matter (lifeless things like rocks, rivers, even the vegetable or fruit you might eat at lunch).¹

But a river isn't really "lifeless," is it? Well, it depends on how you define what is living.²

¹ <https://www.dukeupress.edu/vibrant-matter> I first read about this in an [essay](#) by Barbara Brown Taylor,

² NASA's Astrobiology Center has defined "life" as having seven attributes, and I belabor them here because they exemplify how tenuous it is when we need to order things by creating boundaries of "in or out." The seven key traits of life on earth are:

1. Highly ordered (cellular organization)
2. Reproduces itself
3. Grows and develops to maturity
4. Utilizes energy to function (metabolism)
5. Maintains homeostasis
6. Responds to stimuli

Bennett would have us move away from the binary of vibrant life and dull matter and call it instead an “assemblage of vibrant matter” where water and rock create the environment for teeming life. Electrons and electromagnetic fields have bearing on it all as well.

Can we see trees as part of our whole? Can the granite rock in my garden hold the potential energy of its hot lava origin and share that energy with me? Can the fruit on my plate speak its sacrificial beauty into my being, thereby changing me? I want to be part of such assemblages of vibrant matter!

Last week, we heard that Jesus came to the disciples walking on water, and Canon Rich gave a fine sermon in which he proposed for our consideration that Jesus is always coming toward us. God is always coming toward us, even when we can't see it.

I don't know what Jesus was thinking when he went to Canaanite territory, but if he was teaching his disciples an important lesson, perhaps even with a bit of unsettling discourse with the Canaanite woman, maybe we can say he went toward her, toward her land of otherness, across the boundary of us versus them, and what came of it was good.

A border crossed, a child healed, an aggrieved mother affirmed, a teacher humbled. Not a bad parable for us to consider today.



7. Adapts through evolution.

The criteria have limits. A red blood cell can't reproduce, but is it "life?" A mule cannot sexually reproduce, but isn't it

alive? Perhaps that's an asinine question...A man who's had a vasectomy is still alive, isn't he? You get the point.