

“Entering a World Not of Our Making”

Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15; (10-20), 21-28

August 17, 2008

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From the moment we are born, we enter into worlds not of our making. In my case, I entered a viciously segregationist cultural world. But I entered the insistent integrationist world of my parents. I did not make either one of these worlds, but these were the worlds I inherited and the worlds I spent most of my childhood negotiating. Had I been in charge, I would have created a world in which racism and segregation were unknown. And I sure would have created parents who thought and behaved like everyone else.

Not long after Al and I married, we sallied forth to live in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation with a pocket of Hindus on the island of Bali. I was not intimidated by being among Muslims because my mother, who was a daughter of a Southern Baptist minister in Atmore, had always taught me that there is room for all the faiths in this world. Isn't that a beautiful way to look at things?

But in Indonesia we were having dinner one night with a Chinese-Indonesian couple and I asked them what their religion was. When they said they were Christians and Confucians, I think I got that deer in the headlights look. I nodded politely but I thought "even in a pluralistic world you don't get to be a Christian and...Everything in my upbringing says you have to choose one...maybe they just haven't been Christians long enough to understand you don't get to be a Christian and..." Then I found out their family had been Christians and Confucians for three hundred years? Much longer than the Christians in my father's Jewish extended family. The inclusiveness of my parents' faith world had not prepared me for the reality of Christian-Confucians. It had not prepared me for my Baptist-Hindu neighbor in San Francisco, whose missionary father had gone to India and fallen in love with a Hindu woman.

I had entered a world not of my making. Had I called into being the religion world when I was twenty-five or so, I probably would have made a "choose one" world. But I had not made the religion world. I had to negotiate the real world and bring my beautiful religious theory into alignment with the realities of real life and real people. And when you get down to it, I think the real world of religion is more interesting and more important to negotiate with integrity than any fantasy religious world.

Several years after we came home from Indonesia, Al and I sallied forth into the world of parenting. Growing up, we had watched all the sitcoms like "Leave It To Beaver" and "Hazel." And, like the characters in those sweet 1950s sitcoms, we had the

idea that we were going to be the parents who got it right. And when it came time to teach our kids to drive, we would only have to say “take turns slowly” one time, and they would take turns slowly. And when they moved away we would be so close that they would call us every day.

Then Whitney arrived. And, twelve years later, Leigh Anna arrived. I’m sorry to have to report to you that Whitney doesn’t call me every day. And when I told Leigh Anna “take turns slowly,” I discovered that once, or twice, or three times, was not enough.

I had entered a parenting world not of my making. Had I called into being the parenting world, I would have made a world in which grown daughters call their mother every day and teenagers always take turns slowly. I had to negotiate the real world and bring my sitcom point of view into alignment with the realities of real parenting. And the real world is better and more important to negotiate with integrity than the TV world.

A few years ago, I sallied forth into the world of Vanderbilt Divinity School. I thought I was entering a graduate program where, according to the brochure, everyone regardless of their faith was held in high regard. Prejudices were discouraged. It was a strange and wonderful place where Methodists, Mormons, Muslims, atheists, Catholics, Jews, Hindus, and even Wiccans (that means witches) were held in the highest possible regard. There were many good parts to Vanderbilt and that was one of them.

The bad part is that Baptists were a joke. Baptists were racist, homophobic, anti-intellectuals with goofy hymns. And few people seemed to feel any sense of shame at saying in public that Baptists were what was wrong with the world despite the fact that few seemed to actually have known a Baptist. I have to confess I entered the Vanderbilt Divinity School world not having given much thought to what it means to be a Baptist. But prejudice always makes me mad.

And so, having entered directly, for the first time in my life, into this kind of world not of my making, a world that was prejudiced against me and the people I care most about in the world, I felt compelled to consider what it means to be a Baptist. I left Vanderbilt Divinity School the biggest soul-competent, religious libertarian, self-proclaimed priest among the priesthood of all believers Baptist out there.

If I had been in charge, I would have created a divinity school where combating real prejudice was as important as encouraging theoretical pluralism. But that is not the world I got. And that is the world I had to negotiate. Add negotiating the real world of religious inclusiveness is better than going along with a fantasy world of religious inclusiveness that only exists in brochures.

And, like ya’ll, from the moment I was born, I entered into a Bible interpretation world my family and my culture made. In the Bible interpretation world of my upbringing, God was a good God in control of every reality. In the Bible interpretation world of my upbringing Jesus was the All-Compassionate One, in the upper case. In the

Bible interpretation world of my upbringing, you were allowed to ask questions and disagree, but questioning the idea that God was in control or Jesus was the All-Compassionate One was never on the table.

Up until the time I entered Vanderbilt I was completely comfortable with a God that was in control and a Jesus who was the All-Compassionate One. But, if Vanderbilt had its shortcomings, it also was a place that encouraged me to put up my commentaries and read. Really get in there with the Bible and read. Come up with my own interpretation based on my own deep reading.

And so, this zealously soul-competent Baptist, this priest among a priesthood of believers, has sallied forth boldly into my own interpretation of the Genesis Bible world. And I have sallied forth boldly into my own interpretation of Matthew's Bible world.

When I read the story of Joseph's self disclosure, unaccompanied by commentaries and professionally written ideas for reflection, I don't find the God of my upbringing. I find a God who enters into worlds not of His making, a God limited by worlds not of God's making. I find a God who negotiates a world not of God's making. To be sure, I find a magnificent God who called into being all of Creation out of mud and laid the stars in their course.

Yet, when I enter alone into the world of Creation, the Genesis world of beginnings, I also discover a God who into enters into a world God surely not did not create-the world of death-dealing empires, and Pharaohs, and men who sell their own brother into slavery.

I discover a good God. But this is not the God of my upbringing, this God who has to negotiate a reality set up in part by human beings and human systems. I discover instead, in this story world of beginnings, that facing and negotiating reality is in fact what God does. And I think that the God who faces reality and negotiates reality is a more encouraging God than the always in control God of my upbringing.

Much more problematic is sallying forth boldly into Matthew's Jesus world. In the Bible interpretation world of my upbringing, Jesus was the soft-spoken teacher, the humble carpenter by the road, the healer filled with infinite compassion. He was the All-Compassionate One without peer.

But when I enter Matthew's Jesus world, unaccompanied by commentaries and reflections, I do not find the Jesus of my upbringing. In fact, I encounter a Jesus I do not recognize. In the story of Jesus' back-to-back encounters with the Pharisees and scribes and with the Canaanite woman, Jesus is not the soft-spoken reconciling one. He is not the All-Compassionate One. What we have in Matthew's Jesus world is an apocalyptic Jesus focused on overturning imperial reality.

In Matthew 15, the Pharisees and scribes have come all the way from Jerusalem to ask Jesus what seems to be a fair question given the Jews' precarious place in the Roman Empire. They want to protect themselves as Jews by preserving religious tradition: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." I think that is a fair question. It clearly is important to the Pharisees and scribes. But instead of answering them, Jesus gives better than he got: "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your traditions?" Then he raises the tension level and his voice: "You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine.'"

This Jesus makes me nervous. This is not the soft-spoken Jesus of my upbringing. But then he seems to tone things down. He calls the crowd to him. I sense that he has calmed down, lowered his voice. "Listen," he says. "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." OK. I like that.

But the disciples don't even respond to his theology. Instead, they are concerned that Jesus has offended the Pharisees. "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" But Jesus doesn't have the slightest interest in what the Pharisees think. They are "blind guides of the blind." This is not the reconciling Jesus of my upbringing.

Then Jesus changes directions. "Don't you see?" he says. "Don't you 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." OK. Alright. I like the idea. That's nice. "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."

That's beautiful theology. Sublime theology. Despite the crude imagery, it's an elegant, important religious conclusion. I'm comfortable with Jesus again. The Jesus of my upbringing is back. And, in the Bible world of my upbringing, that is the end of that story. The editors, those people who add chapter numbers and verse numbers, close the story down here. Commentary follows. Reflections.

But in Matthew's story world, this is not the end. And Matthew's story world is the world I am determined to enter, determined to negotiate. What happens next?

Jesus leaves and goes up to the district of Tyre and Sidon, way up on the Mediterranean Sea, Gentile cities far north of Jerusalem and Bethlehem in Judea, well north of Nazareth in Galilee. I'm thinking that in going into this far-off world filled with crazy Gentiles who let dogs in the house Jesus is well outside the comfort zone of a Galilean.

But Jesus is focused on his apocalyptic re-creation of reality. And although he doesn't exactly enter the Gentile world-the Canaanite woman comes out to him-I assume he is going to negotiate the world of the Gentiles. After all, he has just delivered a sublime sermon on the heart being the source of defilement rather than failing to adhere to Jewish religious tradition.

But that elevated theological point was made in the context of Judaism. And this is a Gentile. And when the Gentile woman implores Jesus to heal her daughter who is tormented by a demon, Jesus shockingly is silent as a stone. Maybe this woman's poor daughter has Tourette's syndrome or seizures. Maybe this poor woman's grief over her daughter has made her crazy, one of those crazy people on the street who shout at you, shot at their own demons.

And, like everybody else, Jesus ignores her. He just ignores her. This is not the Jesus, the endlessly Compassionate One of my upbringing. And his disciples, like a celebrity's hyper-protective hangers-on, encourage Jesus to send her away. She is annoying them, intimidating them with her shouting and her demon-possessed daughter.

Then, Jesus comes up with an excuse -"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." What? She is not part of your target audience? And, when she comes and kneels before him and calls him, "Lord," he insults her tormented child: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But the woman does not give up. She persists. Finally, she makes a point that to Jesus is so persuasive that he relents, and heals her daughter instantly.

Not satisfying. Not the Jesus of my upbringing. If I had written Matthew's Gospel, I would have written about a Jesus who was so moved by compassion that he healed the Canaanite woman's daughter the moment she came out to him. I would have had a Jesus who took his sublime theological pronouncement with him to the area around Tyre and Sidon. But this Jesus seems not to have wrestled with his own theological conclusion that this poor woman had no "evil intentions" which defile.

But, wait a minute. I've missed something. The Canaanite woman, when she first approached Jesus, called him "Lord, Son of David." And that rings a bell. That rings a bell. The story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is one episode in a much longer book, a book that was meant to be read from beginning to end in one sitting.

Let's go back. The first verse of Matthew's Gospel is Matthew's own title for this book: "βιβλος γενέσεως": Book of Genesis, book of the ultimate time when the intrusion of an apocalyptic Christ into reality will culminate in a new creation, the "renewal of all things," the re-creation of reality. The Canaanite woman's words have reminded me that this is Matthew's central Christological concern. Matthew's central concern was not the Jesus of my upbringing. Matthew's central concern was the "Son of David," transformed and reinterpreted. Matthew's central concern was the son of Abraham, a Gentile when called by God, transformed and reinterpreted.

This healing, apocalyptic, confusing, contradictory, indifferent, compassionate Jesus is not the Jesus I would have sent into the world to redeem it. For me, the story of Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees and scribes, the story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman reminds me that Jesus intrudes into our reality. But we also intrude into Jesus' reality. And together, we can creatively negotiate a real encounter with reality.

The story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is not the All-Compassionate One of my upbringing. But I've got to tell you, I think this long-expected, unexpected Jesus is better. Now that I've entered Matthew's puzzling Jesus world, a world certainly not of my making, now that I have attempted to negotiate it, now that I've let it recreate my thinking, I've got to tell you I like this Jesus better than the Jesus of my upbringing. This Jesus is not a caricature. This Jesus takes on reality and allows it to change him.

This, too, is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.