

Christ Church + Washington Parish
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September 9, 2018, Mark 7::24-37
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B¹

It's been quite a news week here in Washington, with palace intrigue dominating the paper with who wrote what, who said what, and what did they really mean. The article though that caught my attention was not centered in the halls of political power, but on the Island of Sodor which is where Thomas the Tank Engine lives. Now you may remember from a previous sermon that Thomas the Tank Engine shows have annoyed me because their storylines don't consistently conclude at the end of episode. Nor do they pick up in a later episode. Something that doesn't matter I'm sure to their three year old fan base, but to the watching adult companions, it matters. This article was not about that critique, but was about how Thomas the Tank Engine is attempting to be "woke." Now for those of you unfamiliar with the term "woke" used as an adjective or perhaps why it would appear in the business section of the Washington Post in reference to Thomas, let me bring you up to speed.

While it has appeared a few times in the twentieth century, its roots in slang in the African American civil rights community, it started appearing again starting in 2008, as a description of being aware, more like alert, to racial or social discrimination and injustice. Being woke is a state of mind rooted in the past, the implication being that once someone has become woke, they can't easily go back to sleep. Once you are aware of something it's hard to not see it, in fact you typically see more and more evidence of it. You can't go back to sleep though you can certainly stay in bed, metaphorically speaking. The term really picked up steam in the last

¹ *Disclaimer: I do not read my sermons so actual wording of sermon may be different when preached. Lots of grace would be appreciated for grammatical errors as I both write for the ear and spend time on delivery rather than doing a thorough editing.*

few years in the rise of Black Lives Matter and a growing sense of racial injustice across the U.S. Sure the -ism ills have often been acknowledged, but the extent that they affect the everyday life of communities, friends, and our neighbors and us that was less acknowledged. “Woke” became a shorthand way for people of all races to calling out society’s systemic injustices. The hashtag #staywoke became a way of encouraging people to pay political attention and keep paying attention. Its popularity has meant that it also now used in reference to being aware/alert to a broad range of social issues.

Which is how Thomas the Tank Engine got to be described as woke, or at least hopes that will be how he is described in the future. The article talks about how writers of the show have met with officials at the United Nations to see how Thomas can be more “woke” and help their young audience to be more socially aware. The partnership led to a decision for the writing of ten episodes around the themes of education, sustainable communities, responsible consumption, and gender equity. And the introduction of a more diverse crew of characters including an African car named Nia and a Chinese engine named Hong- Mei who will be making their appearance on the British island. Thomas will soon have his “woke” moment, 3 yr old style.

Today’s gospel is Jesus’ “woke” moment. Jesus was well aware of race and economic injustice in his own time - his parables and teachings make that clear. But this is the story where we see him become aware of how prejudice affects him personally - the way it hardens his heart. It gets close to home. Even the son of God isn’t immune to the insidious effects of racism. The desperate woman who comes to Jesus in the text is SyroPhoenician, a Gentile, a non-Jew. Now Jews were regularly around Gentiles. Jerusalem itself was a hub of multiple ethnicities, and Jesus frequently travels through predominantly Gentile regions. Jesus would have also been taught how Jews had a special relationship with God and a regular prayer in his life would have

been one of gratitude that he was born a Jew and not a Gentile. Think about how that would shape Jesus' perception and feelings towards Gentiles. In a moment of fatigue it comes to the surface in Jesus, and in this passage, Jesus refuses the Syrophenician woman and calls her a dog, a racial slur for Gentiles at the time. But when this woman, in her boldness, confidence, desperation, persists and repeats the slur back to him, "But even the dogs get table scraps," Jesus wakes up. He heard not only the desperation of her reality, but heard the brokenness in his reality. This woman is a child of God, as worthy and as unworthy of God's grace as all the rest of us. Not to be discounted for any reason.

"For saying that, you may go – your daughter has been healed." It is the only time recorded in the gospels in which Jesus changes his mind. It doesn't take me much to imagine how Jesus felt in that moment. I've felt it too when confronted with my own prejudice, my own part in perpetuating the divisions of our society rather than interrupting them.

Embarrassment.

Defensiveness - here's all the reasons that you are wrong or you misunderstood me

Fatigue - does it always have to be about this?

And where Jesus moves much quicker than I tend to - Aha - being woke. I see something that I didn't see before, and this awareness is both devastating and empowering.

Today we are baptizing two children into the Christian faith. It's actually the 100th and 101st baptisms that we've done in my little over 8 years here. Which is a great thing to begin our program year with! The growth of the church and remembering our baptismal vows that express what it means to live as a Christian. And you can see how four out of five questions connecting with being "woke." Will you persevere in resisting evil? Will you proclaim by word

and example the good news of God in Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons?, Will you strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being? And the first question, “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?” is essential to being able to do the other four. It is what supports us in staying woke as Christians. It doesn’t just do it automatically, but it puts us in a posture - a posture of prayer, a posture of openness, a posture of receiving and offering grace, it combats our hardening of hearts - that opens us to doing the uncomfortable work of confronting the -isms of our community and the manifestations of it in us.

I’ve been doing a lot more reading the last few years by authors of color and on some of the social injustice issues in our society, and I feel better informed and more open to confronting the things inside me and around me that perpetuate the social divisions and injustice around me. Yet I failed this past weekend. We were at the Minnesota State Fair, and there was a Black Lives Matter booth offering literature, selling clothes, even a bright pink Black Lives Matter baby onesie. In this sea of mainly white people, no one was going up to this booth. And every time I passed it, I thought, I should go up to this booth and just thank them for being here. But I didn’t. I didn’t because I didn’t know how those at the booth would perceive that comment; I knew my kids would be hanging on me and would probably be disruptive. I just felt uncomfortable. I had literally just finished a book called Raising White Kids talking about how to raise race-conscious children to see and fight racism, and this would have been a great opportunity to practice that, and this group was purposefully intentionally present at this place and this time to engage people, and yet I couldn’t get over the minimal barriers of discomfort in me. The people working that booth are probably no worse off because I didn’t take 2 minutes to

talk to them, but I am as I ponder whether when the stakes are higher and the discomfort even more pronounced whether I would be able to disrupt the patterns of racial division the next time.

Jesus' ability to change course so quickly must come from that sinless part of him. For us mere humans, though, it takes multiple tries and failures amidst the successes. Forgiveness, grace, and repentance become important parts of our faith's battle against the -isms. And the end is not in sight. My original problem with Thomas the Tank Engine was its lack of closure in its storylines, but perhaps this is the way in which it has always been woke. Jennifer Harvey, the author of *Raising White Kids*, says that in raising race-conscious and anti-racist children, we will regularly experience a lack of closure. Conversations are sometimes going to end more abruptly than we had planned or wanted them to, or before we got to an answer we were content with. But that's okay, because it gives our children, and us, permission to be in process and incomplete. We can simultaneously be deeply unsure and yet decide to engage and act anyway. As Christians, surrounded by many mysteries and questions of our faith, that should be a posture we are used to - unsure but engaging and living it anyway. And when we fall short, admit it so they next time you can write a different ending. Good advice for new and old Christians alike and for wading through the discomfort that living our faith in this world sometimes means.