

Sociological Realities

Rev. Joe Connolly

“One of the women was named Lydia. She was devout, a worshiper of God. She carefully listened to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and was a dealer in purple cloth.” — Acts 16:14a.

Today I want to give you some background information about my life. You may or may not have heard some of this before. There will be personal detail but I will also try to offer a perspective from the 30,000 foot level, say what was going on in the world.

However, what I will say is not about me or my life or my times. What I am about to say concerns the Bible. I will try to bring some reality to the way we read Scripture.

Therefore I need to address *this* reality [the pastor holds up a Bible]: the Bible is *not* a book. It is a collection of books gathered, compiled by people who lived in a multitude of cultures across ten centuries, a millennia. By definition it is complex.

And it is absolutely clear *in* our culture and *because* of our culture, some people are blissfully unaware or willfully ignorant of those origins and that complexity. There are those who insist the Bible was assembled in a singular culture and with no earthly influences. And our culture is just flat out wrong on that. Now let me say something about my life. (Slight pause.)

I was born during the first administration of President Harry Truman, his first administration— 1947 to be exact. I hope this is obvious: in 1947 the world was very different than it is today.

I know— some want to return to those thrilling days of yesteryear— as in ‘make America...’ well, you know. Here’s what I think: it’s always inappropriate to reduce life to a slogan or a cartoon.

Indeed I, personally, do not see the '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s, etc. as any kind of golden era. If it was great back then, that certainly was not my experience.

Why? I have said this before. I am a ghetto kid. When I was about five as I looked out the window of my family home I saw someone being mugged. I got my Mom who dashed to the street, brought the victim inside and called the police.

I mail letters only inside the Post Office. Why? It is a reaction to my childhood. Where I lived a gas filled bottle with a lit cloth wick— a Molotove Cocktail— was often tossed into corner mailboxes.

From a 30,000 foot perspective, when I was born WWII had recently ended. By 1952 we were enmeshed in Korea. Then we found ourselves mired in this other Asian country— Vietnam. By 1968 I was myself there, in that place, wearing Army green.

From the forties forward there was a plethora of violence connected with civil rights. People were murdered, lynched. A President, a Presidential candidate, the leader of the Civil Rights movement were assassinated.

Attempted assassinations happened to three other Presidents. Another candidate was severely wounded while campaigning. So, did you know the crime rate *today* is lower than it’s been since the mid 1960s? *The crime rate today is lower than it’s been since the mid 1960s*— did you know that? Or is the buzz of the culture drowning that out? Those thrilling days of yesteryear... were not thrilling.

Here's a reality: no matter what anyone says, earlier times were in no way the best of times. To insist otherwise is to live in a cartoon fantasy. (Slight pause.)

Now that I've stressed the downside, let me tell you the other side of the same coin— some of my incredible, positive experiences. One of my Dad's best friends another teacher at the Jesuit High School where they both taught, Don Kennedy, was also the basketball coach. In 1948 the school's team won the National Schoolboy Championship.

Kennedy was soon recruited to coach at St. Peter's College. His teams made five appearances in the National Invitation Tournament, the NIT. Don also owned a Catholic Summer camp in East Hampton, Long Island which catered to very wealthy families.

In the Summers my parents worked there but were not paid. Instead their children went to camp for free. I got to see how what we very euphemistically call "the other half" lives. Note: "the other half" is a euphemism since we're talking about less than 2%.

Through the camp my parents became friendly with the chief engineer at the U.N. So when I was 11, I had a personalized tour of the U.N., toured areas in which the public was not allowed, such the floor of the General Assembly hall.

Another contact was Leon Leonidoff, 42 years the producer of stage shows at Radio City Music Hall. I got to go backstage, had a personal tour. I will never forget looking up at the big movie screen from behind. I could hear audience reactions and see actors who appeared to be 30 feet tall as I watched the screen from the wrong side.

Later, I worked for the Actor's Fund of America. Academy Award winning actress Beatrice Straight, who was wealthy before she was famous, was on the board.

At a dinner meeting in her townhouse I mentioned I was having a hard time getting a staged reading for a play I had written. She said, "I'll arrange it."

The next day I got a call from the Executive Director of a prestigious non-profit theater who asked what I needed. All that is the other side of my life.

And what was life like from the 30,000 foot level? We put a human on the moon. We developed computers to get us there. You probably have a computer which is descended from that computer we used to put people on the moon in your pocket right now— a cell phone. And, like it or not, our culture dominates the worlds of art, science, commerce. (Slight pause.)

This is what we hear in Luke/Acts in the section called Acts: "One of the women was named Lydia. She was devout, a worshiper of God. She carefully listened to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and was a dealer in purple cloth." (Slight pause.)

Perhaps I've had a strange life. But our lives, our world is not simple. The world is not a cartoon. Life is not a cartoon, though some might try to convince us of that.

Life cannot be pigeonholed and is hard to define or explain and happens on many levels. And so, to reduce life to easily repeatable slogans, to reduce life to cartoons, is to diminish the reality of life, its hardships, its joys. (Slight pause.)

Our tendency, the tendency of our culture is to reduce the stories and the people in Scripture to slogans, cartoons. After all, did you not know the followers of Jesus, the followers of the Way, were poor, uneducated and lived rural areas? That... is what our culture wants us to believe, that the followers of the way were poor, uneducated and largely lived in rural areas.

But no, they were not poor, not uneducated and largely did not live in rural areas. You see, in New Testament times 90% of the population lived in what we would call slavery. An even smaller percentage could read and write. Illiteracy was rampant.

But the New Testament was written and circulated by literate, well educated people. The story we heard says Paul goes to Philippi, a big city, to share the Word. Then Paul goes to Rome which had about 1.5 million people in that era. Paul goes there to share the Word.

And yet Paul wrote these letters to specific cities? None of those churches in those cities to which Paul was writing was larger than about 75 people. This is a very small number of people.

And who is this Lydia? She sells purple cloth. That means she is wealthy. Purple cloth is worn only by people of wealth and stature. This is a lucrative business.

Further, in this society which is patriarchal, no spouse is mentioned. *She* is the head of the household— that is radical. And she can get away with it. Why? Probably because she has wealth and stature.

What does all this say about the followers of the Way? It says our cartoon version of Scripture is at best inaccurate. (Slight pause.)

So, why have I brought this up in my penultimate sermon? It is my penultimate sermon you see because next week we have Music Sunday, the week after that we have Inter-generational Sunday and then I get to preach one more time.

This is my penultimate sermon. Why do I bring this up? I love Scripture. I respect Scripture. But our society has little time or even use for the realities of life we find in Scripture. It much prefers to treat Scripture as a series of slogans, cartoons.

In that way our society undermines both the reality of Scripture and tries to undermine the reality of our lives. Our lives are not simple. Our world is not simple. Life is not a cartoon, though some might try to convince us of that.

Life cannot be pigeonholed. Life is hard to define, hard to explain and happens on many levels. So to reduce life to easily repeatable slogans, to reduce life to cartoons, is to diminish the reality of life and its hardships and its joys. (Slight pause.)

We need to take Scripture seriously. Taken seriously Scripture has two parts— stories and theology. Its stories describe how complex life really is. Scripture is, however, not about the stories. To believe that would really be to reduce Scripture to a cartoon.

The stories in Scripture are merely a vehicle to convey theology. Let me say that again. The stories in Scripture are a vehicle to convey theology.

Therefore, Scripture is about theology and only about theology. That leads to these questions: since this is a

story of Paul's mission, what is that mission? And what theology found therein? (Slight pause.)

Paul's mission is not— *repeat, not*— to make converts. Paul's mission is to share the Word. Please note: Lydia listens. Lydia converts herself through listening. Paul does nothing but share. We, you and I, convert no one. People convert themselves. Just as Paul did, we should simply share the Word.

And yes, Paul simply shared the Word in an environment that was hostile to the Word. Far be it from me to draw a similar parallel.

And what is this Word of God? That's the theology. And I can guarantee what that theology says. God loves us. God invites us to love one another and to share as we live through life's joys, through life's hardships.

You see, there is nothing slogan-like or cartoon-ish about the love of God. So, my next to last message here is this: please love Scripture; please respect Scripture; please take Scripture seriously. How can you do that? Please share God's love. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "Two things: I often say take Scripture seriously, not literally. And earlier I said Scripture addresses life, real life. This quote from the U.C.C. pastor Lillian Daniel addresses life, real life. (Quote:) 'Any fool can find God on a mountaintop. The real challenge is finding God in the company of others as annoying as I am.' Which is also to say loving neighbor is hard. Do not pretend it is easy. Do not pretend living out God's love is easy."

BENEDICTION: We can find the presence of God in unexpected places. God's light leads us to places we thought not possible just moments ago. God's love abounds and will live with us throughout eternity. The grace of God is deeper than our imagination. The strength of Christ is stronger than our needs. The communion of the Holy Spirit is richer than our togetherness. May the One Triune God sustain us today and throughout the infinity of what is commonly called tomorrow. Amen.