

Offensive Jesus

If you're caught off guard by Jesus calling this gal and her very sick daughter "dogs," you're not alone.

It's an offensive thing to say; and it is no doubt *meant* to be offensive.

And yet, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised at the Jesus who offends, the Jesus who insults, the Jesus who tells the truth, especially when the truth hurts.

When you think about it, there's many times Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees and other big shots of his day hypocrites and whitewashed tombs, foxes and broods of vipers: people, Jesus says, who are on a bullet train bound straight for hell.

And yet, Jesus doesn't limit his insults to the high and mighty.

Oh no.

His habit of offending folks goes way back in his life, all the way to his youth, and includes some of those he is closest to.

As a preteen of 12, he ditches his parents and his town folk who are heading back to Nazareth after a time spent in pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

His parents are frantic with worry, but when they find him at the temple, he offers no apology.

Nor sir.

He says: "What's the problem, I'm here doing my dad's business."

I wonder how that response affected Joseph?

After a long silence of some 18 years, Jesus begins his public ministry by going to the local church in Nazareth and, reading from the prophet Isaiah, announces that the blind will see, the deaf hear, and the lame walk – and then goes on to say that today is the day – now is the hour – for these great things to come to pass.

So offended were his fellow citizens that they try to toss him over a cliff.

Weeks later, his family comes to gather him up and take him home, sure that he's lost his mind; only to have Jesus respond:

“Who is my family but those who hear the word of God and do it.”

He calls Peter, his closest disciple, a Satan, because Peter cannot get his head around the idea of a suffering messiah; because suffering, Peter thinks, we think, is evil; suffering is a punishment by God for those with whom God is angry; so therefore, how can the Messiah suffer?

And today, he not only offends the woman begging a cure for her demon possessed daughter, but he offends as well the friends of the deaf mute by telling them to stay away while he heals the man in private.

“My goodness,” they likely think, “we take the trouble of bringing him all this way for a cure: can't we at least watch it happen?!”

Why is Jesus so offensive?

And why do we so often have in our minds-eye the picture of gentle Jesus meek and mild; instead of the Jesus of the gospels

who is constantly challenging, cajoling, insulting, teaching, arguing, demanding and scolding?

Indeed, the only people Jesus doesn't confront are those who already know they are in trouble: the thieving tax collectors who steal from their own people; the prostitutes who sell sex for cash; the outcast and the demon possessed.

Folks who, if they pass by a mirror, rarely look up.

I am a long time fan of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The beauty of AA is that its founders took the spiritual wisdom of the ages, with the help of an Episcopal priest, Fr. Sam Shoemaker, and discovered that recovery from addiction to spirits depends upon learning to live a real spirituality.

It isn't the head game of religion, with its mental assents to dogma and doctrine and creed.

We have need of these things no doubt; but to rescue the hopelessly lost, which Jesus tells us every day includes you and I, something more is needed.

It's been said that religion is for people who are afraid of hell, but spirituality is for people who have been through hell.

And so, in Alcoholics Anonymous, the first step toward recovery is for the person to admit that she is powerless over alcohol.

It's not an admission that comes from the head; it's an admission that comes from brutal experience.

Only from that place, a place of surrender, can the person move forward into recovery.

"Well, that's all fine for the alkies," you may be thinking, "but I'm not an addict."

In truth most of us are not addicted to alcohol or drugs, but I think it can be said safely and without fear of contradiction that we are all addicted to one very powerful thing indeed: call it an addiction to the human condition.

The human condition that says, and see if you can relate:

"I am in control of my life"

or

"People get what they deserve"

or

"Sickness is a sign of God's disapproval of someone"

or

"What goes around comes around."

All of which gets back to the first principle of the human condition:

"I am in control."

This human condition is the air that we breathe, it's the water that we swim in and consume.

It is so pervasive and seemingly normal that to even notice it, much less question it, seems like a fools errand.

Yet it is this human condition that Jesus not only notices, that Jesus not only questions, this condition -- Jesus comes to smash it.

No wonder he ends up on the cross.

No wonder we prefer our sweetly sentimental Jesus to the real savior who alone can save us.

It is our obsession with being in control that leads to unjust and unbalanced class structures, that leads to wars, that leads to strife within families and strife among friends.

Our unwillingness to surrender, our unwillingness to let go of our obsession to control, create the nails that nail Jesus to the cross.

"I am in control" is a deadly virus that infects who we are and distorts who we are called to become.

The need to control gives birth to very strange, but very common myths.

How many people in Jesus' day, and how many people today, believe in their heart of hearts (even if we never say it out loud) that if a seemingly good person becomes afflicted with a disease or an illness or a disability -- then that person is not right with God?

The people in Jesus' day kicked out of the community the lepers and the deformed and the diseased because they were convinced that illness is evidence of God's judgment.

Offensive Jesus says that's a pile of baloney!

That kind of thinking is shabai!

Jesus is the face of God.

If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

And Jesus, everywhere he goes, heals!

Everywhere he goes, the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the demons of anger and resentment are sent flying and the poor hear the good news that illness or poverty or struggle is not a sign of God's anger, they are simply part of what it is to be human – that the accidents of life -- like illness - like disease-- are simply that – accidents!

Which is a very threatening message for those who are healthy and wealthy and otherwise at the top of their game, because what our human condition most wants, most expects, most desires, is that we be in control.

This need for control even infects our relationship with God, which is always intended to be a relationship of dependence on God's free love and mercy – never earned, simply given, because it pleases God to give it.

Our human condition distorts that relationship into a relationship based on the bargain.

“You do this for me God, and I'll do that for you.”

“It's an exchange; and with the exchange, at the end of the day, we're all square God: you and me; I don't owe you; in fact, you owe me, because I lived up to my end of the deal.”

This is the human condition, and it is deadly, because if God owes us, then we don't actually need God; we have taken care of our own salvation all by ourselves.

That is the illusion.

That is the lie.

And it is that illusion, it is that lie, that Jesus rudely comes and shatters.

Truth be told, we are as powerless over our own lives as any alkie or druggie in town.

Just look around or look inside.

Who don't you speak to?

Who have you cut off?

Who do you dismiss as someone less than a human being created in the image of God?

And if you say "I have no sin," then please look a little deeper, because the deadliest sin of all is the sin of pride: the sin that says: "I have no sin."

To let go, to surrender, to admit powerlessness takes humility – and often one doesn't get to such humility without being beaten about the head for quite some time.

Jesus repeatedly scolds his disciples to help them give up, to surrender, a vision of the world that they have grown used to, and to come to see instead the new world being swept in by the kingdom of God; a world that sweeps away distinctions between people; that upends prejudices; that examines the log in my own eye before I reach in to remove the speck from yours.

Sometimes this humility grows from the intense love we have for those closest to us: the pagan lady in today's gospel accepts

Jesus' judgment of her, yet remains steadfast in her desire for his help.

"I am unworthy, and yet I and my daughter are worth healing....." she seems to say.

Jesus is sometimes the farmer who smashes a two by four between the eyes of his mule.

"Why did you do that?" the questioner asks.

"To get his attention," comes the reply.

What Jesus offends is our own sense of power, our own sense of control, our own sense that we have it all together.

It is from our addiction to the human condition that Jesus comes to rescue us.

And the narrow door that allows such a rescue is opened by the grace of humility.

It is said that Jesus sends no one away empty except those who are full of themselves.

And it is Bernard of Clairvaux who assures us that:

"It is only when humility warrants it that great graces can be obtained. And so when you perceive you are being humiliated, look on it as the sign of a sure guarantee that grace is on the way. Just as the heart is puffed up with pride before its destruction, so it is humiliated before being honored."

Jesus is offensive for a reason.

We are each of us tough nuts to crack.

Pray then for the powerlessness, for the surrender, that opens the narrow door to receive God's grace; and as the door opens, be glad and rejoice, for your redeemer is drawing near!

+amen