

This Woke Generation

A sermon on Matthew 12:43-50; 13:54-58 by Nathan Nettleton, 16 February 2020

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Message

Our generation is very good at identifying evils and calling them out, but if our hearts are not occupied by God's love and mercy, the results can be disastrous.

Sermon

In the Story Sharing Event that many of us attended last Monday night, there was a funny moment when Margie, who was sharing her story, spoke of having been “conscientised” back in the 1980’s, and then she realised with a little embarrassment that perhaps she was dating herself because nobody uses that word anymore. Several of us quickly pointed out that the idea still exists and it’s only the terminology that has changed. Nowadays, people talk of being “woke”.

If that term is completely new to you – you probably are dating yourself! – I think it comes from “I woke up” and means having our eyes opened to the truth or having our consciences awakened. It is used as a badge of honour by inner city greenie types and as a sarcastic put-down by right wing politicians and commentators who regard it as all too politically correct by far.

A few months ago, Barak Obama said something about “woke culture” that came back to my mind as I read and reflected on the first part of tonight’s gospel reading. Maybe you didn’t hear it, so here it is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaHLd8de6nM>

Now why I remembered that when I was reflecting on the first part of tonight’s gospel reading may not be terribly obvious, so let me unpack it a little.

Jesus tells a story of a situation after an exorcism. He describes an unclean or demonic spirit that has been expelled from someone and goes off looking for a new home but can’t find one. So it decides to go back where it came from. Returning it finds the person to be like a house that has been all tidied up and nicely renovated, an even more attractive home than ever before, so the spirit calls up a bunch of its friends and they all move in together and the final state of the person is worse than before the exorcism.

Now Jesus could just be describing reality here, but when he finishes, he adds this comment: “So will it be also with this evil generation.” That suggests that this is something of a parable. He is not so much talking literally about individuals and exorcism. He is using that as an illustration or parable of a bigger reality, the reality facing the culture of the whole generation.

That’s where he seems to me to be saying something very similar to the point that Barak Obama was making in that clip. I’m struck by the fact that there is even an overlap in terminology. In today’s woke culture, we talk about “calling out” bad behaviours or toxic attitudes and ideas, and in the older language of exorcism, demons were called out or cast out or expelled from people. I wonder whether what we think we are doing is a lot more similar than we would have imagined.

So what Jesus is saying, and Barak Obama is picking up on, is that it is not enough to just focus on purging the things that we are opposed to. As Barak Obama says, the rise of social media has hugely inflated this tendency to think that we are contributing to a better world if we just sit back in our lounge rooms and fire off angry tweets calling out the bad behaviour and bad attitudes of others. It makes us feel terribly virtuous and woke, because obviously we're so much better than those terrible people with their dinosaur attitudes and their toxic behaviours and their tone-deaf sense of entitlement.

But, says Jesus, however virtuous it might be making you feel, it is not actually producing a harvest of goodness in you or around you. And, as Barak Obama adds, the kind of activism that changes the world for the better does not consist in being as judgemental as possible about other people.

It would be easy to stay with the consequences for the judgemental individual, but Jesus doesn't stop there. Jesus says that this is about a whole generation. This is a cultural issue, not just some misguided ideas in some individuals. "The last state of that person is worse than the first. So will it be also with this evil generation."

Do you see how the dynamic that Jesus describes works? The demonic spirit can get back in and bring its nasty mates with it because it finds the house unoccupied. Something evil was called out and expelled, but nothing positive and good moved in in its place. So what was left was a vacancy, a vacuum, an emptiness that was soon filled by even more toxicity than had been there before.

Can you see how that dynamic is being replicated in what Barak Obama is identifying about our woke generation? We have become experts at identifying and calling out bad behaviours and attitudes. We are on a constant crusade to purge our world of every remnant trace of outmoded and toxic ways of thinking. But what are we replacing it with?

If all that is moving in in its place is anger and judgmentalism and self-righteousness, then Jesus was clearly talking about us because the final state is indeed manifestly worse than the first.

In many ways, our generation is becoming a more and more extreme example of this phenomena. On the positive side, no previous generation has been as sensitive to the feelings and rights of vulnerable minorities and the victims of past wrongs. We have become extremely sensitive to racism and sexism and colonialism and homophobia and all manner of patronising. We have become better and better at thinking about how words or actions might come across to the victims of abuse, or to sexual minorities, or to people with disabilities, or to those from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. All this could suggest that we are on the cusp of a wonderful new age of peace and harmony and understanding. But ...

But we are simultaneously living in a world that seems more dangerously divided than ever. From our political leaders down, all capacity to accept one another's differences and work together cooperatively across our tribal boundaries seems to be going up in smoke. Even in our churches we are increasingly divided between conservatives and liberals and the battle seems intent on destroying any middle ground and driving everyone into one camp or the

other and then lining them all up on opposing battle fronts to angrily call one another out for every perceived error.

We have become the masters of righteous hostility and calling out our chosen evils of every stripe and colour, but the more we do it, the more vacuous we become because we've purged and purged and purged, but we've been too stubborn or proud or stupid to drink deeply of the love and mercy of God and fill our houses, our hearts, our culture, so full of that love and mercy that there is not the faintest possibility of any of those nasty spirits ever getting back in.

The faith and life of the followers of Jesus was never intended to just be about opposing things and rejecting things and abstaining from things. It is much more about what we are to embrace and to fill our lives with. The Apostle Paul, as we heard (1 Corinthians 13:13-14:12), urges us to seek spiritual gifts, and above all, faith, hope and love. When these things fill our lives, the negative things will soon be squeezed out, without any need of angry shouting and divisive finger pointing.

I want to comment too on the connection between this first section of our gospel reading and what follows it. It sounds like a change of subject, and in many ways it is, but the gospel writers often arranged their changes of subject in ways that enabled one story to shed light on another. In this gospel, Matthew moves from this parable of the post-exorcism re-occupation to the story of Jesus's family trying to contact him and him instead identifying all who do the will of God as his true family. And then, after a handful of parables that we skipped tonight, we hear of his rejection in his hometown.

Is there a connection? Maybe not a big one, but I think it does alert us to the dangers of tribalism. Much of our wokeness or our anti-wokeness becomes little better than an expression of solidarity with our tribe, our family, our party. We call out the offences that our tribe has chosen to hate. This can be especially true in our churches where, despite this example from Jesus, family often becomes an idolatry. We've even had a Christian political party that called itself "Family First", a label which should actually sound just as unChristian as "America First" to the followers of one who taught us to always put "others first".

Fierce loyalty to our family, our nation, our tribe easily and often becomes a kind of counterfeit piety by which we align ourselves with one local set of values and against another and then start calling one another out across those artificial lines. Once again we have defined ourselves by what we are opposed to, but left a vacuum inside that quickly fills with toxic spirits of hostility and bitterness and judgmentalism.

What Jesus calls us to is a new life and a new community that is grounded not in the evils we oppose but in the love, joy, mercy, hope and faith that we embrace. And one of the positives in what he says about the new family is that it is a family. Like the exorcism parable, this is not about individuals. We are not called to be heroic lone ranger Christians. We are called into a new community, a community full of all sorts of unlikely companions, from woke vegans with ambiguous pronouns to coal mine executives who sprinkle petroleum by-products on their breakfast cereal. And in that new community we are called to reach hands of friendship across those old tribal lines and to learn to love and respect one another and build a new culture so full to bursting with love and grace and mutual care that the banished spirits will just have to keep on searching.