



Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time A August 16, 2020

- ◆ **The Persistent Woman Who Outwits Jesus after He Calls Her a Dog**
- ◆ **Kate Bowler Talks about Prosperity, Suffering and the Pandemic**

Reflecting on today's Gospel, Fr. Denis McBride, CSSR, writes:

Making your presence felt

In 1919 the people of Plymouth voted in their new member of parliament. The new M.P. was born in the United States, but this was not the reason why the majority of the British parliament was antagonistic towards its new member. The M.P. was a woman, Nancy Astor, the first woman to gain a seat in the House of Commons. Since Lady Astor believed in making her presence felt in the House of Commons, she regularly interrupted other speakers - particularly on the rights of women. When rebuked for her constant interventions, she protested that she had been listening for hours before interrupting. A colleague whispered to her: "Yes, Nancy, we've all *heard* you listening."

In today's Gospel we heard a pagan woman listening to Jesus and we saw how she made her presence felt. She comes across as one of the most attractive characters in the pages of the Gospel: a mother who is tormented by the torment of her daughter, a woman who takes to the streets to make her plea to Jesus, who refuses to take his silence for the last word, who organizes a one-woman protest in the path of these runaway men. She is the only person in the Gospels who has the wit to outwit Jesus. And in the end, she gets what she wants.

To heal or not to heal

Jesus withdraws from Jewish territory and crosses into the region of Tyre and Sidon, present-day southern Lebanon. He is escaping from his opponents who are exasperated at the way he allows his disciples to break with the tradition of the Jewish elders, ignoring the laws about clean and unclean. If Jesus is trying to escape from this problem, he is heading for a large disappointment: he comes face to face with the same question in larger form. A pagan woman comes to him, hoping that he will

have mercy on her and heal her daughter. Matthew calls her a Canaanite—the name given to the older inhabitants of Israel who were dispossessed by the Hebrews. This woman symbolizes all those who are regarded as unclean by Jesus' own people. Will Jesus fraternize with her or not?

The silence of Jesus suggests a refusal to minister to this woman's needs. This is how the disciples interpret it, and they plead with Jesus to do them a favour by getting rid of this mobile nuisance who is screaming after them. Jesus explains his exclusive mission: he is sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. This woman, therefore, is not his problem. She is outside the territory of his pastoral concern.

The woman, however, has no intention of bowing to these theological niceties which leave her out in the cold and abandon her daughter to a life of torment. She stops Jesus in his tracks by kneeling at his feet. "Lord," she says, "help me." Jesus responds by telling a harsh parable, one which voices his own people's traditional attitude to the likes of this woman. "It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Only Jews have a right to be treated as "children" of God; the Gentiles, like this woman, are "dogs."

The woman is not diverted by this offensive rebuff; rather than getting into a scrap about Jewish-pagan relations, she hangs on to the reason why she is there. She tells Jesus that even the dogs can eat the scraps that fall from the master's table. The scraps from the table become dog food. And this woman kneeling at the feet of Jesus lets it be known that she will be satisfied with dog food. In her response she has outwitted Jesus in a way that none of his learned opponents ever managed, and he has the grace to give in. The woman gets what she came for; her daughter is healed.

Going to the dogs

Only twice in the Gospels does Jesus leave Jewish territory. Although his attitude to the Gentile woman seems out of keeping with the way he normally relates in the gospel stories, it probably does reflect strict Jewish-Christian thinking in the early Church. All the first Christians were Jews, many of whom still regarded

Gentiles as unclean. In the Acts of the Apostles we learn that even Peter had to be converted to a new attitude. As he admits to his first Gentile converts:

You know it is forbidden for Jews to mix with people of another race and to visit them, but God has made it clear to me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean. (10:28)

At first, the Christian community at Jerusalem had no mission to the Gentiles. Nobody went to the “dogs,” as they were called. But Paul comes on the scene as the apostle who rejoices in the fact that his vocation is to go to the dogs. He himself was a strict Pharisee, and he too has had to be converted from his attitude to non-Jews. He leads by his example when he spearheads the early Church’s mission to the Gentiles. Paul sets the example for the whole Christian Church. If we believe that Christ died for everyone, then no one is a dog. No one should be excluded from the all-embracing reach of God’s love.

And that is why the Canaanite woman in the Gospel is so important for all of us. She is the teacher of the servants of God. Through her demand for attention and dignity, the voice of God questions us all.

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The Prosperity Gospel, Suffering and the Pandemic

The following interview of Kate Bowler, a Professor at Duke Divinity School, appeared in the July 2020 edition of *U.S. Catholic magazine*.

When a megachurch popped up on the outskirts of Kate Bowler’s town, she didn’t understand why her friends were drawn to its worship. Over time, she discovered that the church preached a message of providence popular everywhere and among almost every demographic.

Bowler devoted years to extensive research across the United States and Canada on what she would come to learn was called the American prosperity gospel—the idea that you will have abundant health, wealth, and happiness if you put the right kind of faith in God. If your faith isn’t strong enough, according to this

mindset, then you deserve the bad things that befall you.

At age 35, Bowler, now an associate professor at Duke Divinity School, had landed a tenure-track teaching position, married, and given birth to a son. By any prosperity preacher’s standards, she was blessed. Then she was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. While never considering herself a believer in the prosperity gospel, this experience made her realize how deeply engrained the idea of a divine reward system is in American mentalities.

Bowler chronicles her experience of navigating intense suffering and the people who try to explain it in her New York Times bestselling memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved* (Random House). She also hosts a podcast, *Everything Happens*, where she explores how to speak about suffering.

What makes the prosperity gospel specifically American?

It developed in the United States based on some very American theories, including the unlimited potentiality of every person. The United States is a country of tremendous optimism regarding human potential. The prosperity gospel also grew out of American beliefs in the power of the mind. In the late 19th century, developing theories about the mind’s power eventually merged into religious and nonreligious cultural expressions: If we begin to think and pray in a certain way, we can actually align ourselves with God’s will and draw in health, wealth, and happiness. So as much as the prosperity gospel is a version of a Christian story, it’s also a version of an American story about how all Americans hope that they have everything they need in order to not just survive but thrive.

How would someone who ascribes to the American prosperity gospel interpret the COVID-19 pandemic?

I think the overall framework for COVID-19, like that of any tragedy, is that it’s a test of faith. It’s an opportunity for believers to exercise control over their circumstances. In the face of sickness or poverty or whatever the obstacle is, people who believe in the prosperity gospel see it as a believer’s duty to pray and speak against any tragedy and reassert spiritual control over the situation. Right now on social media,

prosperity preachers are demonstrating this mindset in more or less extreme ways.

For example, Kenneth Copeland is an example of a more supernatural way of interpreting the prosperity gospel. Copeland and his wife, Gloria, are two of the most famous televangelists in the world. They're on President Donald Trump's Faith and Culture Advisory Committee, an advisory board of evangelical leaders. They dominate late-night televangelism. There are viral videos of Copeland rebuking COVID-19 in the name of the Lord and performing a kind of spiritual exorcism on the virus.

That's a very common reaction within this tradition: to say that something—anything from hurricanes to illness to poverty—is a spiritual problem that demands a spiritual solution. It's in believers' wheelhouses to speak against these problems, pray against them, and defeat them.

A more common prosperity gospel response is that of Joel Osteen, America's most famous prosperity preacher. His response is that nothing is going to stop God's faithful people. Put a smile on your face and do your best: you have it in you to overcome COVID-19.

If the supernatural version is hard prosperity, then the Osteen version is what I call soft prosperity: it's less supernatural. It sounds more therapeutic. It's all about increasing your self-esteem and your own personal resourcefulness.

But despite their differences, both approaches have a similar answer to the problem of COVID-19, which is that in the end you will always come out on top, because God would never let the faithful suffer. And if they suffer, it will not be for long. It's very reassuring, but it's also incredibly punitive for people who find that their lives come apart and they can't put them back together.

What alternatives does Christianity offer for interpreting the COVID-19 pandemic?

The prosperity gospel offers an answer to suffering, but in my experience the richest strains in the Christian tradition do not try to meet suffering with an answer.

One of my favorite things about the Book of Job is that the people who rush in with answers are rebuked. Then at the end God says, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (38:4). I like to think God says that line in a sarcastic voice.

There are other ways of confronting suffering. We don't have to try to use suffering to understand why evil exists or whether evil tells us something about God or ourselves. Christianity offers a framework that tries to help us get past these responses.

Dorothy Day is someone I find incredibly inspiring on this topic, because she doesn't try to meet suffering with anything other than to say that this is the human condition and that we are living inside of precarity—anything we have can be given or taken away.

Day's solution is to not imagine that we can escape our circumstances but instead to learn to live beautifully inside of them. Everything she experienced—poverty, structural and racial injustice, and more—she never described as anything for which Christianity had an escape button.

I find traditions like hers to be deeply rich right now. They don't offer a solution but do offer the promise of God's presence and of community inside of suffering.

Without reasons for suffering, does suffering matter at all?

Yes, I do believe it has meaning. For instance, ever since I started having to live inside of chronic fear and with a chronic illness, I find each day brighter, more intense, more beautiful. When we know we count our hours, we count them differently. Suffering makes us start running the math of our lives differently, and there are some real gifts inside of that.

But it's hard to talk about experiencing suffering as a gift, because people usually try to run an equation with that: They want me, or any suffering person, to say that the suffering is worth it. By that logic, if the suffering isn't better than not suffering, then it's not worth anything at all.

I can guarantee you that most Americans' lives will not be better due to COVID-19, not in the next year, maybe not in the next five years. That doesn't mean that this time can't still be good, beautiful, or meaningful. It's just hard because you can't pronounce that somebody else feels a certain way about this pandemic.

I think that we're promised God's presence in times of great suffering. That's the gift of the Holy Spirit, and it's not an abstract gift. If you are suffering, God is right there and more real to you than ever before. To me, this is a great time for the Great Comforter, a metaphor for

God that I wasn't as into before I started needing it so much.

What have you found to be some more helpful or true things than phrases like “Everything happens for a reason” or “It’s all part of God’s plan”?

Normally I would say to just show up and shut up. But now we can't show up. This is a struggle in our current time, because normally I would say that the gift of presence is one of the best things you can give to someone who is hurting. We don't really need one another to rush in with answers so much as we need the gift of one another.

The problem is that it's totally mediated now. We're all stuck behind glass, and that's already how people who are suffering feel. Finding ways to break through that glass with presence is key. For instance, my parents have a friend who's in hospice right now. They can't visit him, so they sent an old-school iPod full of music they knew he would love. They can't touch him, but he can listen to each song they chose for him. These little, deliberate things can help people feel your presence.

People also need stuff that cuts through the noise. If you have a kid, you know exactly how they make themselves known. They interrupt time. I spent one morning making dragons and wolves out of tin foil. Kids know how to allow randomness to work in their favor. I don't know when we stop having that skill, but I lost it a while ago. People really need one another's gifts right now. I know it's really hard to find ways to offer those little gifts to other people, because people are impaired in so many ways.

How do you typically respond to people who say things like “Everything happens for a reason”?

I know I'm supposed to say people mean well and you should be generous toward them, but I don't always think that people mean well. I think people who use these phrases are saying what makes them feel the safest. They're usually trying to understand why something happened to you and not them, and that is fundamentally cruel. It is theology played out on the backs of suffering people. I hate it. How we talk about suffering people and how we explain suffering matters.

Other than that, people mean well. People don't usually know what to say, but I really want us as a

culture to find better language, especially now. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, there will be no difference between the deserving and the undeserving, other than some people are lucky and some people are sheltered, and some people are not victims of structural inequality.

In one of your recent podcast episodes, you told your guest that she was good at dealing with terrible things. What does that mean?

The woman I was talking to, Nora McNerny, knows when things are unfair, and she'll reflect back the injustice of it, which feels so good when you're on the other side of it. If something bad happens to you, you want your friend to be like, “That's not fair. I can't believe this happened to you. I hate this for you.” All of those things are perfect things to say.

She's also generous. She'll ask: What can I do? Do you need food? Should we bury this body? Stuff like that. She has a high tolerance for how bad things get. That's another quality I like in people who've endured either chronic suffering or chronic fear. If you said, “And then I was burned by acid and then my house burned down,” these people wouldn't spend the rest of the conversation making you feel like an alien for your suffering. They just accept it. That is A-game suffering solidarity right there.

What are some coping strategies for people affected by COVID-19?

Accept that you feel terrible, because it is terrible. Our culture offers us few resources to be honest, and your honesty is a beautiful thing. You're allowed to feel afraid. You're allowed to name how ridiculous it is. The culture of toxic positivity is not allowed to tell you that your fears are unfounded. Acknowledgment is key.

Have people around you who help you manage your fear. I have a friend who helps me decide what the scariest thing is and where I should simmer down. Have your own inner circle of people you can call to help you decide how to manage the things that legitimately are unmanageable.

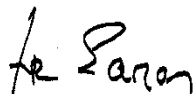
Find agency inside of things you can't control. When I wake up in the morning, I try to do a little battery check: How much do I have to give? Sometimes my battery is very low. I have chronic pain, so sometimes my body is just killing me, and I might not be able to get

to an appointment. Sometimes parenting means that I don't do a single bit of work and I feel overwhelmed. Check your batteries, because we're all living in these ecologies where they're never all going to go up anymore. If you charge one thing, other things will go down.

Finally, be honest about what your resources are and then try to figure out "What's the best gift I can give today?" For some people, it's not a lot. For others, it's not being too snippy with your kid or your significant other or maybe calling your elderly relative. You give the gift, but then you figure out when you're done and shut it down. Go take a nap. That ending point is going to get earlier and earlier for most people. That's fine: Shut it down.

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Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.