

## **"From Ugliness, A Beauty Emerges"**

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Based on Brian D. McLaren *We Make the Road by Walking, Chapter 11*

Texts: Deuteronomy 7:1-11; Matthew 15: 21-39

The text from Deuteronomy is not a comforting, nor comfortable scripture, unless you are an Israelite. It reads, "When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to invade and occupy, and He dislodges many nations before you...and the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter." (Deuteronomy 7:1-2). Doom them to destruction. I don't like this scripture and I'm sure you don't either, so maybe we should avoid it? All in favor?

To avoid the text, though, doesn't remove it from the Bible. It is often the case that people avoid scriptures they do not like and emphasize the ones they do. Still others function as though the distasteful ones don't exist and then they pick scriptures they like and act as if they are the only scriptures in the Bible. They do what is called "proof texting" to say God is like this and not like that. It is much more difficult, yet also faithful to the text to dive into the uncomfortable

places and try to understand them. And thanks to Brian McLaren and his book *We Make the Road by Walking*, here we are. The other reason I think it cannot be avoided is because the practices laid out here have not ended in our nation or around the world to a large degree. Ethnic cleansing, prohibitions on intermarriage and other practices are still a part of the human condition, so we must deal with scriptures used to promulgate these actions as people all the time claim God on their side and work to eradicate the other side, the other race, the other sex, the conquered, whoever. Besides, as *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* tells us, "One comes closer to understanding the [Old Testament] if one abandons efforts to shield it from criticism and sees it in the light of its own time, its values, and standards. The custom to 'dedicate' an enemy to the deity, or to ban him, or after a victory to annihilate him, is told of various Near Eastern nations as well as of the Greeks, Romans, Celts, and Germans. Since the sensitivities of the ancients were not offended by the rigor of this procedure, Moses could use this harsh war practice as a means to shield Israel from pagan infection (p1381)." So great, everyone else did it, so Israel is okay to do that as well? I'm not sure that's what the commentary is saying, but it is saying that it was a widespread practice in those days.

Further, I think it's refreshing in our own time to think that scripture should not be shielded from criticism. While we can explain the social context, it doesn't remove the discomfort of what is prescribed here. By the way, it is true, that "such a policy was never carried out – the Canaanites were *not* annihilated. In fact, in Judges 3:1, God himself is said to have abrogated His original command" (*Torah: A Modern Commentary*). But it is still there and in print and people use it today to justify actual or near annihilation of those who are different from themselves.

In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James H. Cone shares the history of lynching in America. It was often done to keep the races clean, to punish for "mixing of the races" and other so-called "sins." Native Americans could well tell the story of their near annihilation as a people as a direct result of decisions made by the United States Government and the Christian church. To this day, we often separate and judge based on race and use scriptures such as this one as a prooftext to condone the action. At the end of the day, Brian McLaren is right when he says that "this episode in the biblical story, more than any other, forces us to deal with one of life's most problematic questions: the question of violence. By violence, we mean an act that intends to violate the well-being of a person or people." And we all know that violence is pervasive in our

culture and committed by the religious of every kind, and the non-religious as well. No one is exempt from being complicit in the rampant violence of our time.

The main questions for people of faith include: Is God willing to harm others to help some? Is God part of the violence in the world, and is violence part of God? "Or" McLaren says, "is God the voice calling to us in our violence to move to a new place, to join God beyond violence, in kindness, reconciliation, and peace?" What do you think? (Long pause)

Despite what we may think, there are many people who "sincerely believe that God loves *us* and wants peace for *us* so much that God has no trouble harming or destroying *them* for our benefit." You don't have to look far for people who see us as blessed and them as condemned by GOD. It is one thing to judge other people, but it is quite another to judge them on God's behalf, deciding that to the victors go the spoils, even if the spoils include God's blessing. Yet there are many people in the Bible, as well as in our contemporary world, who give God credit and praise for *our* victories and *their* defeats. I'm quite sure that God would not agree with our assessment that when we win God is on our side. Funny thing is that there aren't many who think that when we lose God is no

longer on our side. It's like we get God no matter what and to heck with them, whoever them is!

It is also true that in our Bible "even as they prepare for war, they are told again and again that after the conquest ends, they must treat 'aliens and strangers' as neighbors, with honor and respect, remembering that they were once 'aliens and strangers' themselves in Egypt." This still doesn't solve the problem of violence to the extreme of annihilation then, nor now, but this, too, is in our scripture. Funny how we don't quote those scriptures very much, even though they far outnumber the scriptures prescribing annihilation.

A better way is to look to more than just a few scriptures to determine where God is active in the world and on whose behalf and how that might lead to how we might act. If we turn to other voices in the Bible, for example, our story from Matthew where a woman named a Canaanite (which no longer existed as an identifiable culture in Jesus' day), finds from Jesus, *mercy*. It is up until this exchange with the Canaanite woman that Jesus believed he was sent to the lost of Israel. This story redefines his ministry to being much wider than that. Jesus then begins to spread his healing well beyond the bounds of his own people. I'm quite sure that we are called to move our ministries well beyond

the bounds of *us*. And yet, few in the church seem to do so. Sure, we do charity work for *them*, we pray for *them*, but they are still them and we are still us. That is not the way of Jesus.

McLaren also draws our attention to the feeding story we read today. Yes, fish and loaves are multiplied so all can eat, but did you notice what is left over. In the previous miracle story of feeding in Matthew, there are twelve baskets left over, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. But in this story, there are seven baskets left over – suggesting, it seems quite clear, the seven Canaanite nations that Jesus' ancestors had been commanded to destroy. Matthew's version of the story makes a confession: *Our ancestors, led by Moses and Joshua, believe God sent them into the world in conquest, to show no mercy to their enemies, to defeat and kill them. But now, following Christ, we hear God giving us a higher mission. Now we believe God sends us into the world in compassion, to show mercy, to heal, to feed – to nurture and protect life rather than take it.*"

So, what am I calling for this morning? First, a recognition of our violent history, often claiming God as not only the one who blessed our violence, but who called for it. Whether or not this was accepted in ancient times, this clearly is unacceptable, even in Jesus' time, let alone ours. Second, as part of that

recognition, we must deal with the aspects of scripture that make us uncomfortable, including uncomfortable portrayals of God. Trust me, both God and the scripture can handle our scrutiny. Third, regardless of what happened then, violence is still the norm in most of the world today – including in our own country. We must scrutinize that as well, especially when God's name is invoked as one who blesses the activity. Be aware who claims God's blessing and what it means for those they exclude. And that is the final and most critical point here: God is inclusive. Everyone is created in the divine image. What we do to them we clearly are doing also unto God their creator. There really is no *them* and *us* in God's eyes. Only us – all of us. That is demanding work as so often it's easier to name them, ostracize them, dehumanize them, and ultimately carry out violence against them. No wonder it's so much of what is occurring in the world. It is far easier to destroy, it seems, then to love. And it doesn't matter what your political background is, as violence against the other is far more often the norm, rather than the exception.

Catch yourself when you say them. Who is them? Who are they in God's eyes? Do they deserve our violence – whether it be personal or national? Why is it that we so often have someone identified as them to hate? Who determines who *them* is? Who benefits from our participation in the destruction

of *them*? We can decry biblical and historical violence all day long – and we should name it – but it does no good if we continue to carry it out today. We know better. We can do better. The time to change is now. Let us change what we can – *us*. Now THAT would be a blessing – both to *them* and to *us*.

In the many blessed names of the God of All. Amen.