

**SERMON- Proper 8 (B)**  
**Charles R. Cowherd**

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Psalms 130

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

**St. Timothy's (Herndon)**

**June 30, 2024**

**Mark 5:21-43**

**OPENING:**

An teaser for the upcoming patriotic holiday:

According to someone not from the United States,  
a Yankee is anyone who lives in America.

According to someone from the United States,  
a Yankee is someone who lives north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

According to someone from north of the Mason-Dixon Line,  
a Yankee is someone who lives in New England.

According to someone from New England,  
a Yankee is someone who lives in northern Vermont,

And, according to someone from northern Vermont,  
a Yankee is someone who eats pie for breakfast. <sup>1</sup>

**HONOR**

It was a society that was bound by innate concepts of honor.

Honor determined that society's dense notions of social place, cultural hierarchy and status.

Honor governed relations between rich and poor, old and young, men and women. It created boundaries that were not meant to be crossed, as caste and class were inviolable.

Religion then worked to ensure and maintain these concepts of honor as a matter of social cohesion.

To break them meant a ritual and reality of challenge and violence

I am speaking, of course, not of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, but of the American South. Or perhaps, the American South of my parents and grandparents... where the word 'Yankee' indeed was a "four letter" word.

I would like to examine, this morning, this concept of honor, as it exists as a part of our Gospel lesson and as a part of our world, recognizing that only Charles Cowherd could turn a story about female menstruation into a meditation about North and South, and the American Civil War, but, in doing so, trying to use the lens of our own country's experience to understand what Jesus is saying and doing then and now.

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to E.B. White

## **GEOGRAPHY:**

First some geographical definitions:

In the Gospel, Jesus has returned from the Greek world on the Northside of the Sea of Galilee to the Jewish world on the western side where he is greeted by a Jewish crowd and Jewish leader.

That's the context of our Gospel story.... But it's hard for us to place ourselves into it. So let's try another, closer to home:

When I taught in New Orleans, Louisiana, I wore my identity as a Virginian proudly, because everyone there was so acutely proud of *their* home. As a matter of honor, I would sing the praises of the Old Dominion, Mother of Presidents, knowing that, in fact, the University of Virginia, and University of Richmond were 'Harvard' and 'Yale' to my students in the Deep South.

Teaching history and government, we would eventually get into question of what was a "Southerner" and I quickly found out my students' definition was based not on the boundaries of the old Confederacy but, instead, the "South" was defined by whatever state university played football the most effectively on Saturday morning. I would still claim Virginia as "Southern," citing the American Civil War as evidence, but to them it had more to do with football, or one's accent, and race relations.

Sociologists of American history, and of the Old South, state that it was this idea of "honor" that was a key difference between North and South.

As an example of what I am talking about, in the North parents taught their children to listen to their conscience, to an inner understanding of right and wrong.

In the South you were taught to understand things based on how things appeared on the outside, so based on honor and propriety and shame.<sup>2</sup>

(One should not, of course, confuse "honor" with "honesty" as hypocrisy abounded in a land where human beings owned others.)

## **BLOOD**

Alongside notions of "honor" is this question of "blood" that looms over the story. Mark is somewhat squeamish about it; the thought, though, is if he were talking about a bloody nose, he would have been specific about it.

He deserves some credit for at least broaching it as Leviticus seems to be in his cross-hairs, or more precisely the rigid in interpretation of their honor-bound purity laws.

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<sup>2</sup> Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed.) New York: Oxford, 129.

In the American South, the notion of “blood” mattered heavily in parenting, this was reflected in naming conventions and all the begetting in family genealogies, which not unlike the Old Testament, it mattered who your parents were. One “came from good stock” (as if you were breeding with horses.)

The North, meanwhile, taught that the point of parenting and society and life was to create conditions that the child exists independently of one’s tribe and ancestry.<sup>3</sup>

Some families in the South, like my own, took this a step further and to preserve bloodlines and would marry cousins.

My great great-grandfather, Colby Cowherd, married his 1<sup>st</sup> cousin, Mary Jane Cowherd (such that she did not have to change her last name) for the same reasons that such marriages were common Ancient Israel, or to be sure, in European royal families.

What lessons in honor and in blood does Jesus offer here?

An important man comes and heartbreakingly pleads the case of his blood daughter. He calls her his “little girl”.... Even though she was 12 which would have been too old for that designation. He is saying, in our own modern-day speak, “my little girl, my **baby** is dying.”

Jesus is then interrupted by another woman who has no family, has no tribe, comes from bad stock, of no blood worth anything, no one would claim her if you held a gun to their head. She has blood but it’s bleeding such that it’s breaking the rules. Jesus heals her... and calls HER daughter. The fancy term for this is ‘fictive kinship’ language and it abounds in Paul and the New Testament, we will get more of it next week when Jesus talks about his own biological family, his own flesh and blood, as Jesus remakes the rules about who is to be honored, what is honorable and who belongs to who’s family.<sup>4</sup>

## **GOSPEL:**

We need to travel a distance in order to understand our story, to understand the depth of Jesus’ transgressions in them. How about this?

Jesus has crossed into the American South, “the land of cotton, old times last be forgotten.”

He is being mobbed at the center of the town, let’s call it ‘Richmond’ or ‘Charleston.’ The venerable religious cleric, let’s call him an ‘Episcopalian,’ has beseeched him, bewailing that his daughter is dead. People make way for him, plantation owners and merchants and hoop-skirted Southern belles, not to mention

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<sup>3</sup> Wyatt-Brown, 119.

<sup>4</sup> Ched Myers. 2018. *Binding the Strong Man- A Political Reading of Mark’s Study of Jesus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis. 200-203

the enslaved and the poor white trash who make up the outer ring of the commotion. Then a Belle Watling-figure interrupts the careful drama that is being enacted—reviled and family less, let's call her a 'mulatto prostitute' infected with some sort of contagious ailment—she pushes herself toward the itinerant preacher and cuts across those honor-bound, and shame-ridden boundaries.

What happens next?

The Kingdom of God breaks through.

What happens in this story is that: "Something like an electric shock proceeds through her body" where this "eruption of curative energy" means the "transcendence of Levitical purity restrictions.... (where the woman has experienced in her body a touch so overwhelming that she has experienced in her body the power of God's new age."<sup>5</sup>

Can you picture that? Can you enter into the story in that way? Or is there too much dust to be transplanted either to that time or to Jesus' time.

Of course, we don't actually need to time-travel, because although we presume our society to be egalitarian, rights-driven, equal before the law.

We know that there are borders and boundaries where power and money and celebrity rule.

We yearn for Jesus to come in and break down the chasms that exist.

## CONCLUSION

I am conscious of preaching this sermon in anticipation of July 4<sup>th</sup>—the lectionary always has a trick up its sleeve—and I preach it, paradoxically, as a proud American, and Virginian, and Southerner.

I will close with one more mention of honor. And how we talk about it here in church. When we transition from one part of the service to Holy Communion, what's called the Offertory, the priest pronounces a sentence and I, and most Episcopal priests choose the third option: "Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God." This is a good one, from Ephesians, about love, everyone loves love.

There are lots of other options (pages 376-377) and sometimes you will hear the second that goes like this, it's from Psalm 96.8:

"Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his name; bring offerings and come into his courts."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Marcus, Joel. 2005. *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven: Yale, 367-368.

<sup>6</sup> *Book of Common Prayers*, 343-344 (Rite I), 376-377 (Rite II).

“Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his name; bring offerings and come into his courts.”

It's a vestige from the old, tribal, antiquated honor-bound society. But it has value and currency for us still. Every Sunday, every week, every day of our lives, we are called, challenged in places public and private to give honor to the things that have value and worth in our lives.

We are called to stand up for the poor, and the defenseless, the orphan and the sick, to give them honor, knowing that in doing so we give honor to the God that showed the same.

**AMEN**