

OPENING

There is a scene in the TV show “Sex and the City” in an episode appropriately entitled “The Good Fight” where Charlotte, one of the main characters, is discussing her failing marriage to her husband, Trey, to a friend. She tries to explain why the *way* they fought was so significant.

Well, Trey and I hardly ever yell.

We're WASPS, WASPS don't yell..... It's genetic.

There is the famous dinner scene in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*. In the movie, Woody Allen’s Jewish character is dating Diane Keaton’s Gentile (non-Jewish) character. In the middle of dinner with one family, the movie screen famously splits to show the tables of both families, Jewish and Gentile, with two different atmospheres in stark contrast. Both are set in 20th century Manhattan, but are worlds apart from one another in customs, cuisine, and manner of conversation.

We see the family of ‘WASPS’ (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) at a staid Easter Dinner with conversations proceeding in an orderly fashion, but tension boiling though just below the surface. Simultaneously, we see Allen’s Jewish family, where we now encounter a totally different culture, where conversations confusingly overlap, with family members interrupting one another, and with no topic off-limit. These two depictions are generalizations, stereotypes even, but they carry great kernels of truth.

GOSPEL:

Our Gospel also exists in a setting where two different cultures are similarly colliding and coming to terms with difference. It too says something about tensions involving race, ethnicity, religion, and gender.

Our Gospel features a short, tense argument between a Gentile woman, a Syrophenician, whose daughter is sick and Jesus, a tired, and seemingly cranky, Jewish rabbi. An argument breaks out, and Jesus..... *loses* that argument??

By my count, most of the Gospel narrative features Jesus *winning* arguments.

He wins over his parents in the temple when only a child,

he runs circles around his disciples too many times to count,

he overwhelms the Pharisees.

The young rich man does not stand a chance against him, nor does Nicodemus or Pontius Pilate, even Martha—complaining about doing too much work—she’s no match for Jesus.

Jesus might well be the “Perry Mason” the “Harlem Globetrotters” of 1st century debaters. But here, in our story today, seems to be the only argument that Jesus ever loses.

ARGUMENT:

Before returning to the text, I would submit that argument itself is hard-wired into our faith and our faith’s history. The easiest evidence is the word “Israel” itself, which means “to wrestle with God.” The patriarch Jacob was given the name “Israel” after he wrestled—which is the most visceral way to argue—with an angel, after which Jacob says that he had seen God “face to face” and receives his new name and blessing.¹

Jesus also spends a lot of time engaging in argument. Jesus, particularly the Jesus depicted in Mark, is not a pleasant guru wandering around the countryside dispensing fortune cookies of advice to make people feel better. Rather, he’s the frantic healer, who is in constant motion, often successful, sometimes not, who has tactile encounters with all with whom he comes into contact with.

These patterns suggest a life of faith that’s a struggle, a passionate argument. Last week highlighted, in the Song of Songs, that there is even a metaphor running through our Scriptures of the existence a passionate love affair, between God and humanity, where there is communion and embrace, but also difficulty and distance and argument

In other words, to return to my opening, we should be saying: *as Christians, we yell, we yell all the time, it’s Genetic, it’s in our DNA.*”

Where do we get it from? What gene gave us that as an inheritance?

One scholar puts it this way:

“The special status of Israel rests not upon her merits, her strength or numbers or

¹ Genesis 32.

intelligence or honesty, but upon something irrational, a passion, an affair of the heart, not the mind, in short a love. All the efforts to explain the special destiny of Israel in rational terms only dissolve its power.”²

In our faith lives, argument and conflict should not necessarily be signs of trouble or discord, but rather of honesty and authenticity.

If I heard it once, I heard it a million times at Seminary, “conflict is not the sign of problem, but the sign of opportunity, that people care about what is happening in their church, etc.”

You would almost think that we are to go out here and cause conflict.

As a Cowherd, someone as WASPY as they can get, that is hard to do.

SYROPHOENICAN WOMAN:

Now there are ways to wiggle around our text, to maintain Jesus’ undefeated stretch of arguments.

Some people say:

1) This was just Jesus on a bad day, interrupted rudely on his day-off, and we should give him a mulligan.

2) Other say that maybe he had a facial expression that somehow explained his argument in some way. So, and I am not making this up, maybe Jesus was *winking* and thus he was on the side of the woman the entire time, he was just engaging her to convince his disciples that salvation should be opened to all Gentiles.

3) Some try to parse the role of dogs in Mediterranean culture at the time.

Are we talking wild dogs or domesticated? Maybe he was just saying “puppy”?

4) A final way of wiggling around this, suggested by Martin Luther and others, is that Jesus was trying to push the Syrophenician woman, that this is a story of Persistent Faith where it seems like God is saying ‘no’, but actually God is saying ‘yes’. That Jesus wanted to push the woman towards a tenacious and unyielding faith, that is why he was so rude to her.

Those very well may be true interpretations. It’s something that indeed we can indeed argue about. Anyone who has ever been in a relationship, particularly a romantic one, knows that *how you remember* an argument is important, maybe just as important as *what* you are arguing about.

By my estimation, the plain sense of the text seems to say that Jesus lost the

² Levenson, Jon Douglas. 1985. *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis: Winston. 76-77.

argument, and we are stuck with that, even if it makes us uncomfortable. We wish that we could construct Jesus to be as sensitive and virtuous as we are *here*. But he was incarnate *there*, in Palestine, 2000 years ago. So we have to argue that out and consider what a Jewish male of the 1st century would have thought and considered about a woman confronting him in *that* context.

The good news is, though, Jesus does not need us to defend him, and how could we. Jesus lowered himself to live among us and to die on the Cross.

My thought is then that he had it in him, to lose an argument to a foreign woman. And maybe even admit that he was wrong?

CONCLUSION:

In the end, we probably should not expect to win our arguments against God, but the struggle and wrestling are the warp and woof of how we encounter God. The Syrophenician woman stands in that long tradition of argument and debate. Her *chutzpah*, so to speak, should be celebrated and lifted up.

Two short anecdotes to close:

First, the story is told that the famous German physicist, Max Planck, died and went to heaven. St. Peter met him at the gate saying, ‘Professor Planck, *this* door goes to the Kingdom of Heaven, while *this* door leads to a discussion about the Kingdom of Heaven.’ Apparently for Planck, who had spent his whole life studying the building blocks of life, as well as the argument between science and religion, the latter door was too attractive.³

Second story, in his autobiography, writer Nikos Kazantzakis recounts a conversation he had with an elderly priest of great wisdom. Kazantzakis asked:

“Do you still wrestle with the devil, Father Makários?”

The priest answered: “Not any longer, my child. I have grown old now, and he has grown old with me. He doesn’t have the strength... I wrestle with God.”

“With God!.... and you hope to win?” exclaimed the writer

“I hope to lose, my child, My bones remain with me still, and they continue to resist.”⁴

³ Willimon, William [“What Time is It?”](#) Long, Thomas G., and Cornelius Plantinga. 1994. *‘A Chorus of Witnesses’: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans. 105.

⁴ Rolheiser, Ronald. 2014. *The Holy Longing: the Search for a Christian Spirituality*. Princeton, NJ: Image, 266.

May we, in our lives,
possess the courage of those who were/are willing to argue,
to debate,
as we rest in the knowledge that our faith tells us
that we engage in those arguments in the presence of an all-loving, merciful and
healing God. **AMEN**