



“Jesus Saves! Go Bananas!”

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1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11
(NRSV)*

We were cautioned in my seminary preaching class not to use ourselves as a sermon illustration in a way that makes us the hero of the story, as if to say to the congregation see, if only you were more like me, then you would be a better person. But they didn't say anything at seminary about using your spouse as a sermon illustration. So, while not exactly the hero of this story, this illustration does give me a chance to brag a little about my wife, Lourdes.

Before the holidays, Lourdes got a job as a sales associate at the Emeryville Gap store. She was a seasonal hire with no guarantee that she would be retained after the Christmas rush. Not only was Lourdes retained, she has been their top performer in December and January. She has shown the Gap management what I already knew: that she is extraordinary at sales. One of the ways the Gap evaluates their sales staff is by how many Gap credit cards they get people to sign up for. Among Gap employees getting someone to apply for a Gap card is called a “banana.” Lourdes has exponentially more bananas than anyone else at the Gap; many days she has more bananas than all the other employees combined. One day she was responsible for seven of nine bananas. Lourdes is now known at the Emeryville Gap as the Banana Queen. More than an opportunity for me to brag about my wife, there are lessons for us in the work of a Banana Queen, but we will return to those in a little while.

First, let's take a look at this morning's scripture lessons. We heard two of this morning's lectionary readings. Paul speaks of the good news of Jesus through which we are saved, while in Luke, Jesus dismisses Peter's confession of his sinfulness and calls him to be a fisher of people. We didn't hear it this morning, but the other lectionary text has Isaiah protesting to God, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” One of God's winged attendants, a seraph, flies by and touches Isaiah's lips with a live coal, blotting out Isaiah's sins and preparing him to go forth and speak for God.

All three texts, it seems, have everything to do with salvation and evangelism. Salvation and evangelism. Now isn't this funny. These two words, salvation and evangelism, are at the very heart of the Christian tradition. And yet there are probably no two words that make liberal, mainline Christians more uneasy than the words salvation and evangelism.

There are good reasons for this. Both words have been used by some over the years to hurt and oppress people. In fact, these words have too often been squished together into a single hurtful expression of judgment, “You are a sinner and must be

saved or you will burn in hell. Convert.” Salvation and Evangelism. Let’s see if we can redeem these words, help them speak good news to us this morning.

I don’t know a lot of you intimately. That is, I don’t know your deepest hurts, losses, fears and doubts. But I dare say we all have such hurts, losses, fears and doubt. These can range from brothers or sisters who always seemed to be favored by our parents; a parent or spouse who left making us feel abandoned, making us feel like it was our fault; childhood taunting about being a sissy or being ugly; society’s judgment of our sexuality or the color of our skin. The list goes on and on and on. We all bear the imprints, the scars of these experiences, experiences that communicate that we are not good enough, smart enough or pretty enough.

If you will allow me to play amateur sociologist for a moment, I suggest that one of the ways we respond to these hurts, losses, fears and doubts is to surround ourselves with people who affirm us and accept us. More specifically, we surround ourselves with people who are like us. We surround ourselves with people who have had similar experiences, with people who are culturally similar, have the same education and interests, who have similar political and religious beliefs, who have the same skin color and sexual orientation. This circle of like-minded people lets us know that we are OK.

Of course there is nothing wrong with this. Sociology aside, it is just more fun to hang out with people that we have something in common with. But it can have the effect of reinforcing our differences to the point of judgments. Let me use a silly example.

Tom grew up loving Bugs Bunny. Bugs was so smart and he made Tom feel smart. Tom loved that Bugs never seemed to be worried about anything, that he just took his time in everything but still won out in the end. Geraldine on the other hand loved Road Runner. Geraldine had a learning disability, was judged slow by her teachers. She loved that the Road Runner was so fast, that Road Runner had no need for a lot of talk, just “Beep-Beep!” Tom and Geraldine teased each other unmercifully. Geraldine said that Bugs was all talk. Tom would insist that Road Runner was stupid. Tom made sure that he hung out only with a Bugs Bunny crowd; the Bugsies learned to speak with great authority, building themselves up as “thinking” cartoon followers. Likewise Geraldine’s posse knew that the Road Runner revealed the true path of action. These days Tom and Geraldine are polite to each other, but don’t have much to talk about.

The point is that in seeking to be affirmed and accepted, we often manage to reinforce separation, difference and judgment. It is within this context that Jesus saves.

Now, there are lots of ways to understand Jesus. But this morning, let’s consider Jesus as he engages us through the gospel stories of his life, death and resurrection and the parables he told. The stories of Jesus and Jesus’ stories save by first accepting us, then by reconciling us with each other. Jesus saves by first accepting us, then by reconciling us with each other.

There is a beautiful simplicity in the way Jesus does this. Jesus accepts us and affirms us by showing us people like ourselves, people who experience hurt, loss, doubt and fear—and accepting them. As in this morning’s gospel story, Jesus gets into the same boat with us, finds something in common with us, and validates us. Notice Jesus’ answer to Peter when Peter says, “Go away from me for I am a sinful man,” saying in

effect, “I’m not good enough.” Jesus says, “Do not be afraid,” that’s your fear talking, you’re fine, let’s go. Jesus saves, Jesus accepts.

But Jesus doesn’t just accept me or you. Paul notes that the resurrected Christ appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time. Then he appeared to James, then all the apostles. Last of all, says Paul, he appeared also to me. Jesus presents himself in a form that accepts and affirms all of God’s children. By doing this Jesus bridges the differences that separate us.

Jesus’ story, his *stories*, don’t speak just to Bugsies or just to the Road Runner posse. The many faces of Jesus’ stories allows each of us to find ourselves in there somewhere. This diversity, the inherent plurality of Jesus’ stories, offers hope that Toms and Geraldines find a way to connect across differences. Jesus saves, Jesus reconciles.

Salvation is acceptance with all our hurts, losses, doubts and fears, and reconciliation with each other beyond these. And evangelism? Evangelism is acceptance with all our hurts, losses, doubts and fears, and reconciliation with each other beyond these. But instead of being the recipients, through evangelism we are asked to communicate acceptance and reconciliation.

Which brings us back to the Banana Queen. I have asked Lourdes, how do you do it? How do you sell so many bananas? She usually responds with something like, “I don’t know babe (we call each other babe), I just talk to people.” But she doesn’t just talk to people. First, she has a great eye for what looks good on people, she helps people find clothes that fit and flatter. In this way, she makes people feel good about themselves. She accepts and affirms them.

Then she bridges their differences. She will come home talking excitedly about a woman she met whose driver’s license was from Alabama. They made a great connection when Lourdes shared that her mother-in-law (my mom) lives in Alabama. When someone else used a USAA credit card, a card for current and former military personnel, Lourdes found out that they had both lived in Japan and missed the sushi there. This is reconciliation.

We might be suspect if this were just a strategy to sell bananas. But this is just who Lourdes is. Using the same affirming and reconciling approach in the Waikiki hotel where she worked, Lourdes made lasting friendships with dozens of people around the world. She still exchanges phone calls and Christmas cards with many. Acceptance and reconciliation are relationship strategies, not sales strategies.

Now Lourdes would deny that she is an evangelist. Others might agree—that conversations about Gap clothing and Japanese food hardly qualify as evangelism. But remember, Jesus’ first conversation with his prospective disciples was about fish, dare I say sushi.

Salvation and Evangelism. Acceptance and reconciliation. Jesus saves! Go Bananas!