

Pentecost 12 08.16.2026 - Fr. John Warfel

I'm a real pushover for Southern women
and it's no surprise why,
my grandmother was from the South

Grandma Evelyn pops up in my sermons now and then
Why, she's the reason I'm an Episcopalian,
and the reason I have good table manners

Every summer, I loved visiting Evelyn down south in North Carolina
I loved listening to her friends talk
I wasn't just fascinated by their accent
I was fascinated by their whole way of life,
a life decidedly different from my own

Did you ever see the movie *The Help*?
It's one of my favorites: it's a candid peak into the lives of southern women
And it reminds me of the world Evelyn lived in when I was a child

It is an excellent movie and an even better book-
because it evokes a wide range of emotions-
in a skillful, entertaining way

At the same time, it's a movie that touches a nerve.
The Help explores the intense emotional connection between white children-
and the black maids who raised them.
The setting: a racially segregated Jackson, Mississippi
The time: the early 1960's

The Help touched a nerve in me-
because it exposed an **unnerving** fact:
Beneath all the good manners of Evelyn and her friends
Beneath the veneer of charm and grace
lay an insidious undercurrent: unchallenged, unacknowledged racism

The things I heard them say!
The things I heard my own beloved Grandmother say!
Long forgotten - cruel, hateful, ignorant things about black people,
It all came back to me,
In a chilly dak theatre,

The first time I watched *The Help*

Jesus says, *It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.*

He was responding to the Pharisees,
who criticized Jesus because his disciples ate without washing their hands first,
a breach, not of manners, but of the Holiness Code, the Law

This is a theme that Jesus returns to time and time again:
It's not about obeying the **letter** of the Law;
it's about obeying the **Spirit** of the Law.

Now Evelyn and her friends loved their white, Anglo-Saxon Jesus
Church membership was as important to them as country club membership
Like the Pharisees, they obsessed about the preparation and serving of food.
What went into their mouths was as important as how it went in,
good table manners were an absolute.

Sitting upright at the dining room table,
flawlessly set with old family china and silver
Evelyn and her friends were waited on by The Help

In their heart of hearts, they thought that they were good Christians
even as bigotry spewed from their mouths,
betraying otherwise compassionate hearts and minds,
defiling the Holy Spirit within.

Now if this sounds harsh, I suppose it is.
Even as a child, I knew that their comments and attitudes were hateful
I knew that they were wrong
I knew that even my limited experience told me something different
But I also knew that I was nine years old
and it was not my place to challenge or contradict grown-ups

What we say out loud, especially in front of children,
The things that come out of our mouths,
These things truly matter.
They have consequences. Their influence ripples beyond the here and now

What comes out of our mouths either bless or curse,

build-up of break down, honor or defile
Half-truths, out-right lies, juicy gossip, self-righteous judgment,
dismissive disdain of entire races or groups of people:
all these defile the God-part within us.

So how can we explain what comes next in today's gospel?
After Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees
And warns us against the dangers of an unbridled tongue,
He insults the Canaanite woman,
he slams her publicly, he compares her to a dog.

Two very important things are going on here
First, we are reminded that, although Jesus is truly God,
Jesus was also truly a man who lived 2000 years ago.

Jesus of Nazareth was a product of his own time,
a reflection of his own environment.
Jesus was a first century Palestinian Jew

In a world where Jews and Gentiles were segregated,
Gentiles were regarded as the great unwashed. They were shunned.
The Law forbade Jews from eating with Gentiles.
The law forbade them from even sitting at the same table.

Now we know that Jesus often crossed social barriers
Remember his long conversation with the woman at the well?
Remember her astonishment that Jesus, a Jewish man
would ask her, a Samaritan woman, for a drink of water,
and from the same cup?

Yet when confronted by the pushy, uppity Canaanite woman in today's gospel,
Jesus ignores her, he pushes her aside simply because she wasn't a Jew.

I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel he tells her.
It is not fair to take the children's food, and throw it to the dogs.
What do we make of this seemingly insensitive, ethnocentric Christ?

The first important truth to glean from this story is that, although fully God,
Jesus was also fully human, with human reactions and prejudices.
This is tough to swallow for those who insist on a flawless, perfect Jesus

But the Incarnation demands that we accept Christ's human nature,
as well as the divine
Jesus had good days, he had bads days, just like us.
More important, this story shows us that-
Jesus was capable of changing his mind.

That's right
Even the second person of the Holy Trinity, The Son, The Christ,
was vulnerable to the movement of the third person of the Trinity –
the Holy Spirit.

It's very clear:
At some point during his earthly ministry, Jesus expanded his focus-
from the House of Israel to the rest of the world.
He changed his mind.

And maybe the Holy Spirit used the Canaanite woman to help change it.
Even after being put down by Jesus, she shouts:
*Yes Lord, you might think I'm a dog,
but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.*

Jesus was blown away by her faith-
her conviction that He alone had power to help her.
The Jews didn't get it, but she did.

The second truth revealed in this story-
Is that, like Jesus, we too are culturally conditioned
And like Jesus, we too are capable of changing our minds.

Evelyn and her peers and were all born at the end of the 19th Century
Many of them were raised by parents who lived through the Civil War
This is not an excuse for their blatant racism,
but it is an explanation.

As individuals, and as the People of God
It takes time to grow up. It takes time to mature spiritually,
Evelyn and her friends were products of their environment,
influenced by a particular culture and mindset.

Evelyn and her friends simply ran out of time:
they died before they experienced a change of heart

But I believe that what is left unfinished on earth
is somehow completed in heaven.
I simply have to.

In the meantime, things continue to unfold here on earth.
No matter what we think about the state of the world,
It's pretty clear that we are shedding many of our old prejudices

Blatant bigotry is no longer tolerated,
not as it used to be.
We have a long way to go,
and it's a painfully slow process to be sure.

But seeing *The Help*, gives me hope
It gives me perspective.
I can see change.

More and more people consciously filter what comes out of their mouths
More and more people challenge old prejudices-
and open themselves up to changes of heart
Even in my own lifetime,
I can see that the Kingdom of God has come just that much closer.

Fifty years ago
The Episcopal Church would not have ordained a non-closeted gay man-
to the diaconate, no less to the priesthood.