

“On Condescending to Welcome God”  
 Proper 20B (September 23, 2018)  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen<<

In an August piece in *The New York Times Magazine*, Kwame Appiah, a philosophy professor at NYU, gives a brief history of the word “condescending.”<sup>1</sup> Condescending “used to be a good thing,” he writes. Back in the 18th and 19th centuries it referred to an act of “generosity” and basic kindness, as when a “person of [one] status treated a person of [another] status as though they were peers.” Samuel Johnson’s 1755 dictionary defined the word “condescension” as “Voluntary submission to equality . . . .” Writer Fanny Burney in 1778 said that “condescension” is a “distinguishing virtue” of the moral life - a sign of one’s kindness. Jane Austen, in her 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*, connected “affability” with “condescension.” And in the 1830s, John Payne Collier, a librarian for the Duke of Devonshire, recalls in his diary that the Duke invited him to lunch in his palatial dining room, and went to great lengths to, in Collier’s words, “lessen the distance between us, and to put me at ease, on a level with himself.” “I . . . call it . . . kindness,” he wrote.

Today, “in our more democratic age,” writes Appiah, “we don’t dare admit that we think we are better than others, let alone that anyone is better than us. . . .” “The first article of [our] Constitution declares . . . : ‘No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States.’” But “something like [that old meaning of] condescension remains a common practice,” he says. “We’ve simply lost the name for it. When the president of a university stops to speak to a student after a lecture, she is talking down a hierarchy of academic status. The student is likely to be charmed - just as an Episcopal priest is gratified by the ‘considerate’ attentions of a bishop, and the security guard is pleased when the ‘down to earth’ museum trustee remembers her name.” If we want a “culture with a greater regard for the dignity of [all],” he concludes, “the way to get it may involve [being kind in this way.] Pretend equality can be excellent practice for the real thing.”

In today’s gospel reading from Mark, Jesus teaches his disciples about what we might call “good” condescension - the condescension Kwame Appiah describes (although I have to admit that this word still sounds like nails on a chalkboard to me). After telling the disciples again that his way will lead to a cross, and after he’s just told his disciples - as we heard in last week’s reading - that following him means taking up a cross, the disciples are confused; and, writes Mark, they didn’t ask for clarification. Jesus has taught them about self-sacrifice and service - taking up a cross - but, in the very next scene, we find the disciples arguing with each other over which of them was the greatest. It’s one of those tightly wound tales - like so many others in the gospels - that provide just enough detail to keep the story moving apace; but also one where we might wish to pause and be a fly on the wall to hear them argue. We might also want to jump into the scene ourselves, blow a whistle to stop the fight, and tell the disciples they’re all wrong about who is the greatest. Muhammad Ali was “the greatest.”

Jesus blows the whistle himself to stop the fight, gathers up a little child, and tells the disciples, “if you want to be first you must be last and servant of all.” And then, he says, “whoever welcomes someone like this child, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me,

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/28/magazine/thank-you-for-condescending.html>

welcomes the one who sent me.” It’s a lesson in treating all people treated as peers, regardless of place in life, as Kwame Appiah writes. Or as Fanny Burney and Jane Austen and the librarian John Payne Collier recognized: it’s showing kindness that “lessens the distance between people, and puts everyone on a level plain.”

By holding a child to make this point, Jesus is being especially provocative. As they still are today, children in antiquity were the most vulnerable members of society.<sup>2</sup> The “last” in line, to modify the words of Jesus. A person’s greatness, says Jesus, is measured not in the markers of success, or in positions of power, or in accumulated wealth, or in letters after their name, or in the connections they might have to people who matter. Greatness is measured in how society’s most vulnerable are treated. Jesus adds a bit of theology to hammer home this point: by welcoming society’s children, we welcome him, and by welcoming him we welcome God. Or, to put that differently, we see God in the faces of the most vulnerable, those who feel the least safe.

I was reminded of these words of Jesus when I came across a story recently about a man who was shaving on a commuter train leaving New York City.<sup>3</sup> The man, Anthony Torres, “was mocked online after he was recorded shaving at his seat” while riding the train. “A fellow passenger ... [recorded] Torres, sitting in his seat, steadily swiping away at his lathered face and tossing the shaving cream from the razor onto the floor.” “Welcome to New Jersey transit!” read the video’s caption. “The self-grooming earned its share of negative comments on the internet, with insults like ‘slob,’ ‘animal,’ and ‘nasty.’ Others humorously lauded his steady hand with a razor. A few cautioned against passing judgment and suggested people didn’t know the whole story. The truth, Torres said, is that the video captured him at a vulnerable moment. He had been homeless and staying in a shelter in New York City. He’d reached out to his family for help. A brother gave him money for a train ticket, which he was using to get to another brother in southern New Jersey. ... He said he left the shelter before having a chance to shower and clean up and wanted to look ‘presentable.’ ‘I don’t want to say that I’m homeless, [and] let everybody know,’ he said. ‘That’s why I was shaving.’ ... Torres said he worked a number of different jobs, including casino security guard and then construction. He moved to wherever the work was, like Florida, where his adult son lives. He said he spent time living in motels or sleeping in bus depots. Medical conditions have also been a problem ... [He’s suffered] two strokes in the past two years.” When he arrived at his brother’s house, he felt unworthy to sleep inside, and so asked “for a sleeping bag, saying he was prepared to go spend the night under a bridge.” When he found out he’d been filmed on the train, he said “he was amazed and a little upset. ‘I never thought it would go viral, people making fun of me,’ he said.” His brother Thomas “said they reached out to [the] media because he thought it was important for people to hear his brother’s side. ‘Maybe people will have more feeling knowing what this [guy’s] been through,’ he said.”

Were he around today, I could imagine Jesus embracing Anthony Torres while saying the exact same thing he said to his disciples so long ago: “whoever welcomes one such child - one such human being - in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes ...

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of scholarship on children in antiquity, see: [https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/31425862/Aasgaard\\_Children\\_Research\\_History\\_Familia\\_2006.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1537615614&Signature=mPUJ7znRHnRr7hcwZRMMydzM8gtE%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DChildren\\_in\\_antiquity\\_and\\_early\\_Christia.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/31425862/Aasgaard_Children_Research_History_Familia_2006.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1537615614&Signature=mPUJ7znRHnRr7hcwZRMMydzM8gtE%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DChildren_in_antiquity_and_early_Christia.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/man-shaving-on-train\\_us\\_5ba0b916e4b013b0977ec84a?ncid=tweetlinkushpmg0000067](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/man-shaving-on-train_us_5ba0b916e4b013b0977ec84a?ncid=tweetlinkushpmg0000067)

the one who sent me.” And, I could imagine Jesus teaching that greatness is measured in the compassion one shows to this person who shaves on a train to look “presentable.” And if Jesus were around today, I could imagine him saying to our many Catholic brothers and sisters, who’ve been stricken with horror over the clergy abuse in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, that greatness is not measured in clerical office or preservation of an institution, but in how the church’s children are treated. And if Jesus were around today, I don’t think it’s a stretch to imagine him saying greatness is measured not in immigration policies that isolate children, but in policies that protect them. And if Jesus were around today, I could imagine him teaching that greatness is measured not in personal arsenals, but in how we protect children in schools and on city streets from gun violence. And if Jesus were around today, I could imagine him teaching his modern disciples about greatness by pointing out after this week’s news that greatness is not measured in prestigious degrees, or elitist pedigrees, or successful careers, or in the powerful positions of U.S. Senators, but greatness is measured in how one treats a vulnerable fifteen year-old girl at a party; and, in how one treats all those involved in that alleged incident from the early 80s that has stalled the Supreme Court nomination process. These words of Jesus measure greatness not in one’s shrewd calculation of how their political party might benefit from all this on election day; but his words measure greatness in the degree of compassion shown *now* to the countless women who’ve been retraumatized this week, who’ve had nightmares from the past triggered and called up like haunting ghosts,<sup>4</sup> and who are made to remember again how *they* - like those women at the empty tomb in the Gospel of Luke - were not believed by the people who mattered at the time. If you’re a Twitter user, I would encourage you to scroll through some of the thousands of stories shared this week from women and men reliving the past with the hashtag: WhyIDidntReport. I was scrolling through those stories on Friday. After a minute or so, another hundred or so stories appeared. I refreshed the page and scrolled some more. Another several hundred stories appeared. I waited a few hours, and over a thousand more appeared when I refreshed the page. One person Tweeted yesterday: “Every single person posting #WhyIDidntReport is reliving their trauma [this week] to try and teach folks to extend long overdue empathy. The folks posting are only a drop in the bucket . . . .” Journalist Caroline Chen Tweeted these statistics: out of 1,000 sexual assaults, only about 300 are reported, only 57 of those will lead to an arrest, and just 7 of them will result in a felony conviction.

The Jesus who once embraced a little child and taught about how to measure greatness, is the same Jesus, who the gospels say, practiced what he preached: when he sat beside a woman at a well and just talked with her when no one else would; or when he stood between a condemned woman and her hypocritical accusers, and said, “let the one without sin cast the first stone at her”; or when he showed compassion to a woman the gospels call a “woman of the city” - a euphemism for prostitute - while those sitting nearby were ready to dismiss and judge her; or the time he invited himself over to the tax collector Zacchaeus’ house, when everyone else shunned the man; or when he touched a leper; or when he forgave those who crucified him; or when he stopped mansplaining to a Syrophenician woman and simply empathized with her situation. “Whoever welcomes one such person in my name welcomes me,” he taught, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes . . . the one who sent me.”

---

<sup>4</sup> See the science behind this: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/19/opinion/kavanaugh-christine-ford-sexual-assault.html>

...This week Caitlin Flanagan published a piece in *The Atlantic* that recounts her story from the past, but with the twist of redemption.<sup>5</sup> Let me close by sharing a portion of that story, which begins with a letter. “‘Dear Caitlin,’ an inscription in my 12th-grade yearbook begins. ‘I’m really very sorry that our friendship plummeted straight downhill after the first few months of school. Really, the blame rests totally on my shoulders. To tell you the truth, I’ve wanted to say this all year. I know you’ll succeed because you’re very smart and I regard you with the utmost respect ... Take care - love always.’ He was headed to a prestigious college,” writes Flanagan. “I was headed to a small, obscure liberal-arts college, which was a tremendous achievement, not just because I was a terrible student, but also because I had nearly killed myself as a response to what he apologized for in my yearbook.” It was an attempted date-rape. “I had grown up in Berkeley,” she continues, “but just before my senior year of high school, my father took a job on Long Island. ... I desperately missed my friends - although I only found out years later, my father was confiscating all of their letters to me. He thought they were a bad influence, and that I should make a clean break. I felt completely alone. ... I couldn’t figure out how to make friends ... . But then a good-looking senior [who later wrote that letter] offered to drive me home one day. I was excited ... . I saw the solution to all of my problems: my sadness, my loneliness, my inability to figure out how to go to the parties the other kids were always talking about in the hallways and before class started.” “I told no one [after the incident]. ... In my mind, it was an example of how undesirable I was. It was proof that I was not the kind of girl you took to parties, or the kind of girl you wanted to get to know. ... Telling someone would not be revealing what he had [tried to do]; it would be revealing how deserving I was of that kind of treatment. My depression quickly escalated to a point where, if I’d been evaluated by a psychiatrist, I would probably have been institutionalized as a danger to myself. I had plans for how I was going to kill myself. ... But then, at the beginning of the second semester, [a different] boy asked me out. Another drive home ... - you’d think I would have learned, but from the minute we got in the car, I knew this was different.” Flanagan goes on to describe their conversation, his kindness to her, how they eventually started dating, and how the boy who’d written the letter of apology met her two years later with tears in his eyes and apologized again.

...If you get a chance, take some time to read all of Caitlin Flanagan’s piece in *The Atlantic*. But this little snippet I’ve shared with you is one example, I think, of how powerful - how eternal - is that teaching of Jesus: the teaching that greatness is measured in kindness - kindness and empathy and compassion. Such greatness is a form of welcome - an opening of arms that embraces not only the people around us, but the Christ in those people; and not just the Christ in those people, but the God who embraces us all. Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/me-too/570520/>.