

“Charlie Brown and #SaltyJesus”
 Proper 15C (August 18, 2019)
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

Last week Nicole Rudick published a piece in *The New Yorker* about the Peanuts comic strip.¹ “Charles Schulz’s beloved comic strip,” writes Rudick, was originally just a “space filler to be used in any section of a newspaper, even the classifieds.” But what made the comic distinctive in the 1950s and ’60s was that it “invited readers to contemplate the big picture [of life] on a small scale.” The “small scale,” Rudick continues, is the world of Peanuts - of children. It’s the world, she says, of an “oddly shaped boy” named Charlie Brown, with an “abbreviated torso,” “economized limbs,” and a “capacious orb [of a head]” Peanuts is the world of “an anthropomorphized dog” named Snoopy with a large imagination, so large he could transform his doghouse into a WWI fighter plane and himself into a flying ace. And Peanuts is the world of other children - Lucy, Linus, Franklin, Peppermint, Schroeder, Sally, Marcie, Pigpen - “children,” says Rudick, “who don’t behave or speak as children [typically] do” Children who talk like adults, and in the small space of their small scale world, deal with some of life’s most pressing issues - the big picture - issues of morality; violence; life’s hardships, life’s meaning.

The Peanuts strip that appeared in newspapers on Tuesday, March 6, 1958, addressed the issue of violence by focusing on the small scale of a brief exchange between two characters. The strip was simple with lots of white space - just four panels and two characters, Lucy and Charlie Brown. Lucy begins by saying to Charlie Brown, “That kid in school sure said some mean things about you today.” “How come you didn’t hit him?” she asked. To which Charlie Brown replied, “I have observed that whenever you try to hit somebody there is a tendency for them to try to hit you back.” “You are a shrewd judge of human nature, Charlie Brown,” says Lucy in the final panel.

Another Peanuts strip from Sunday, April 18, 1965, addressed the issue of morality. The setting is a pitcher’s mound where Lucy is complaining that Charlie Brown won’t throw a beanball at the batter. Charlie Brown refuses because he believes throwing at a batter is immoral. The rest of the children on his team howl in protest, and gather around the mound, asking questions like: “What about the way the early settlers treated the Indians? Was that moral?” “How about the Children’s Crusade? Was that moral?” By the end of the strip ten players are hurling questions at Charlie Brown about history and the morality of things like advertising and conservation. In the final panel, Charlie Brown is alone, and says, “We never win any ball games, but we [sure do] have some interesting discussions!”

One more Peanuts strip is worth mentioning. It appeared in newspapers on Monday, March 17, 1969, and had just four frames with two characters, Lucy and Linus, pondering the meaning of life. In that strip, Lucy complains, “I have a lot of questions about life, and I’m not getting any answers! I want some real honest-to-goodness answers. . . . I don’t want a lot of opinions. . . . I want answers!” Linus says sarcastically in the final panel, “Would true or

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https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/how-peanuts-created-a-space-for-thinking?mbid=social_twitter&utm_social-type=owned&utm_brand=tny&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter

false be all right?” The point of this strip, writes Nicole Rudick, is to say that there are no hard-and-fast solutions to life’s challenges. Linus’ answer is not an answer; it just raises more questions. Here’s how Rudick summarizes Peanuts: “The [comic] strip’s achievement, and a significant reason for its longevity, is its creation of a space of inquiry that is never closed off.” Charlie Brown’s warning about tit-for-tat violence, children raising big moral questions around a pitcher’s mound, Lucy’s demands for answers to life’s big questions. “Peanuts,” says Rudick, “create[s] a space for thinking.”

It’s an interesting way to describe a comic strip, and it got *me* thinking about some of the slogans we use in the UCC to describe the Bible. We say the Bible is a “place to start” a conversation and never the final word. We say that God is “still speaking” to modern readers through the words of the Bible and through the faith community. Maybe the Bible also, like Peanuts, “creates a space for thinking.” Its small scale stories and characters, like Charlie Brown and company, help us to “contemplate the big picture.” We might even modify Rudick’s statement about Peanuts by saying, “The *Bible*’s achievement, and a significant reason for its longevity, is its creation of a space of inquiry that is never closed off.” On its pages we can see how ancients in the faith tell their stories, using timeless words to help us think about timeless human issues - issues of meaning and violence, wonder, trust, family, love, friendship, community, gratitude, grace, sacrifice. In dealing with these issues, some of the Bible’s phrases have become part of our everyday language² - phrases like “by the skin of one’s teeth,” which comes from the Book of Job. The phrase, “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” comes from the gospels. The phrase “a drop in the bucket” comes from the Book of Isaiah. The word “scapegoat” comes from the Book of Leviticus. And the phrase “to cast pearls before swine,” are words of Jesus. Jesus also spoke of truth being heard “out of the mouths of babes,” which makes me think of Peanuts.

Yes, the Bible addresses timeless human issues; yes, biblical phrases are part of our common language. But sometimes it’s the Bible’s emotion that connects most powerfully with us. Some of the Bible’s most potent words are its most emotional ones. Who could remain unmoved after reading of Job’s unspeakable trials - the tragic loss of his family, his torturous illness, the callousness of his so-called friends, his cries of terror? And who of us hasn’t searched for meaning like Abraham or like Jonah? And who of us hasn’t asked the same question as the Psalmist, who, during a period of intense suffering, asked God, “How much longer?” The Bible pulls us into the life of insecure Moses as he tried to lead people; it lets us sit with Jesus beside the woman at the well - a woman who longed to be treated as a human being instead of as an object. The Bible teaches us compassion through its healing stories; and it painfully opens up the world of guilt and shame and family controversy in the stories about King David. The Bible energizes faith and hope when it pulls us into the world of a young shepherd boy who toppled the military might of a giant named Goliath with a sling and a few smooth stones. The Bible opens us to wonder with the first disciples when they peered into an empty tomb. And the Bible lets us throw our arms up in the air in dismay, when we see ourselves in the struggles of the prophet Jeremiah against, what he calls in today’s Old Testament reading, “the false prophets” - national leaders who speak lies. Yes, some of scripture’s most potent voices are its most emotional ones.

And, I think it’s emotion that we’re seeing in today’s gospel reading, too. Today’s text is one of the most challenging in the gospels, because it seems to run counter to everything we think

² See for example, <https://www.rd.com/culture/common-bible-phrases/>

we know about Jesus. Today's reading portrays a Jesus who casts "fire" onto the earth; a Jesus who says he isn't bringing peace but division; a Jesus who promises to divide family members (he's not a family-friendly Jesus); and a Jesus who dismisses his followers as a bunch of hypocrites. In a sermon she preached at General Synod in June, Reverend Kaji Dousa called the Jesus of today's text, a "Salty Jesus," a phrase which became a hashtag on Twitter: #SaltyJesus. The Urban Dictionary says the term "salty" was first used in the U.S. Navy to describe disgruntled sailors, who'd been out at sea too long and had become "salty." The Urban Dictionary goes on to define "salty" as being "angry, agitated, upset," "bitter," "edgy."³ Words we don't often associate with Jesus. Words that seem to contradict the image of Jesus as the "prince of peace," a gentle shepherd who once told a story about a father and a prodigal son being reunited instead of divided; a Jesus who taught his disciples to greet everyone they meet in the spirit of peace. Salty Jesus is certainly unsettled in today's gospel reading. And it's hard to know why exactly. Maybe it's because his message of good news for the poor and of liberation for the oppressed and of embracing the outcast was getting pushback. He got blank stares from the crowds and from his disciples. Religious leaders accused him of being demon-possessed. They judged him for offering forgiveness so freely, and they began to plot against him for challenging the status quo by lifting up the downcast and humbling the proud. What Jesus offers is change - something different from the status quo. Maybe he's salty because, as writer Patricia Lull puts it, "Some things matter so much that only ... strong speech [that grabs attention] can carry the ... message."

Last week, George Yancy, Professor of Philosophy at Emory University, published an op-ed as a letter to God with "strong speech" that grabbed attention.⁴ In it, Yancy admits to being an atypical philosopher. "I weep too much," he writes. "I feel too deeply. I'm impatient when it comes to human suffering" "I am facing a non-ideal world where I witness haunting images of unspeakable tragedy." "Dear God," writes Yancy, "This letter was prompted by the 22 precious lives taken in El Paso on August 3, 2019, by a 21-year-old white supremacist gunman." "Just hours after I sat down to write," he goes on, "I heard about the horrible killings of nine more people, this time in Dayton, Ohio, carried out by a 22-year-old white male gunman. How much can any of us take?" he asks. "This letter is a lamentation," he says; "it speaks to our human pain and suffering" It "desires to speak ... on behalf of children and to free them from our miserable failure as adults to honor their lives more than we honor flags, rhetorical mass distraction, political myopia, party line politics, white nationalistic fanaticism, and religious vacuity." Yancy continues: "I define myself as a hopeful Christian theist, the kind who hopes, without any certainty, that ... Christian love, is possible and liberating in a world filled with so much existential, social, and political catastrophe, where anguished parents cry long into the night because their children have been taken too soon by acts of mass violence."

I think we need Salty Jesus. A Jesus who can rage and fume with us about the state of things in our world. A Jesus who casts fire and upends the things that need upending. A Jesus who in one moment will flash anger at evil, and in another offer grace and forgiveness to bring healing, whispering the words, "Do not be afraid. God loves you."

This mixture of emotion - the anger and the lament, the sadness and the hope - was captured in a story told by journalist Rick Rojas about Father Fabian Marquez.⁵ Father Marquez is a

³ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=salty>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/opinion/gun-violence-god-philosophy.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/11/us/el-paso-church-priest.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

Catholic priest, serving a bilingual, Spanish-English parish on the outskirts of El Paso. The days after the shooting were for him “a string of vigils, rosaries, memorial services, and funeral planning sessions.” “In the hours after the shooting ... , Father Marquez rushed to a school that had been turned into what the police called a family reunification center. Families hoping to find their relatives piled in. Before long, many got word that their loved ones were safe, in hospitals, nearby stores or at a friend’s house. As the hours went by, the number of families waiting dwindled. Eventually, 17 were left. Father Marquez waited with them overnight and into the following morning. At around 10 a.m., he encouraged them to join him in prayer. They said the Lord’s Prayer, they offered one another peace, and he recited for them the 23rd Psalm: ‘The lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.’ At 10:30, law enforcement officials began taking families into another room, one by one. The priest sat beside them ‘I cried with them,’ Father Marquez said. ‘I prayed with them. I embraced them, because you cannot help but feel their pain.’ He has vowed to attend the funerals held by each of the 17 families he had prayed with,” and he presided “over the funeral Mass of Raul and Maria Flores, who had been married for 60 years and who [died] together”

On the Friday after the shooting, Father Marquez was in his office trying to write his Sunday sermon. “He had not even read the Bible verses scheduled to be the week’s readings. ‘I haven’t had the time,’ he said. He hoped that a message offering comfort would come to him. ‘I always follow what the spirit tells me, and we take it from there.’ ... In his homily, switching between English and Spanish, Father Marquez ... [said] it had been his toughest week as a pastor. But he said that he drew comfort from the Mass’s reading from the Gospel of Luke. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ Father Marquez said ‘Those are the words [Christ] gave us when we are all afraid.’ He repeated it, for his congregation, and it seemed, for himself: ‘You do not have to be afraid.’”

...I think it’s this final phrase that is so meaningful to me as I read Father Marquez’s story. Salty Jesus who toppled the tables of money changers and who spoke in anger about casting fire onto the earth, is the same Jesus who said to his disciples half a dozen times in the gospels, “take courage, do not be afraid. I am with you.” Tender words of healing every bit as potent as his saltier side. Amen.