

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday After Pentecost: Luke 11:1-13

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Some of you may know this already, but I think it's time to make it official. I am a Star Trek fan. There, I said it. It feels good to get it off my chest. See, I love the escape into a possible future, the near-utopian vision of an entire planet united as a uniquely important people, the swash-buckling, bowlegged strut of a brash captain boldly going where no one has gone before. Tipped my hand there, didn't I? Any of you true Trekkers (yes, "Trekkers" is the preferred term. "Trekkies" is just, well, it's tacky.), any of you true Trekkers will notice that I opted for the Next Generations' phrasing there, "where no one has gone before." I mean, I love Captain Kirk and the Original Series, don't get me wrong. The swagger, the machismo, the over-emphasized delivery, they made the series, carried psychologically heavy episodes to interesting and thought-provoking conclusions. But, at heart, I'm a Picard, Next Generation guy. I know, picking a side this early is dangerous, and I've probably just lost half the audience, but I'll try to make this worth it for the rest of you.

Star Trek: The Next Generation has one of my favorite characters from any genre or medium, for that matter: Data. Data is an android. For you Sci Fi layfolk, an android is a robot built to look and function like a human. But Data doesn't just *look* human; he has the appropriate wiring in his neural processor to allow him to *explore* his pseudo-humanity. In other words, through Data, we see a non-human looking in at humanity and trying to figure out what's right about us. There's an amazingly powerful episode from the third season that's stuck with me, quite a statement, given that there're over 700 episodes in the Star Trek canon. I don't think I need a spoiler alert here; the episode aired almost 30 years ago, but just in case, here there be spoilers. Earlier in the series, a close friend is killed on an away mission, and much of the crew is shaken by the loss. Even the mechanical Data feels it. But this episode involves a different loss, this time a less crucial character. While the crew mourns the loss anyway, Data observes that the proceedings are less grave, the mood of the crew less affected by her death. Data finds a willing crewmate and brings the question to the fore. He says, "Since her death, I have been asked several times to define how well I knew Lieutenant Aster. Does the question of familiarity have some bearing on death?"

The crewmate responds, "Do you remember how we all felt when Tasha died?"

And Data responds, "I do not sense the same feelings of absence that I associate with Lieutenant Yar. Although I cannot say precisely why."

"Just human nature, Data. We feel a loss more intensely when it's a friend."

And here's the kicker, the question that keeps this moment replaying in my mind as our world seems to descend into wilder and wilder chaos: Data asks, "But should not the feelings run just as deep, regardless of who has died?"

"Maybe they should, Data. Maybe if we felt any loss as keenly as we felt the death of one close to us - human history would be a lot less bloody."

And there it is, an insight into our world pulled from a silly sci-fi show with a robot. That's why I watch Star Trek. Because the flashy starships and the weird new species create space for us to explore ourselves, even though that exploration doesn't always lead to inspiring or happy results. But that's a kind of prophecy. A true prophet doesn't hold up humanity and say that everything is as it should be. A true prophet holds our flaws to the light and refuses to let us turn away, refuses to let us ignore them or even paint them as false assets. A true prophet shows us ourselves and lets everyone else see that all-too-real portrait of us as we really are.

But some prophets have a little more tact than others. Take Hosea. Hosea comes in, throwing open closet doors and slinging insults without so much as a "mind if I look in here?" But he speaks the truth, speaks

the hard truth to a people whose faith is failing, who have forgotten their neighbors, who have forgotten justice. Hosea speaks to a people who have forgotten how to pray, and they desperately need his hard words to hear the truth. And Jesus' disciples are no different from the folks who heard Hosea's message. In fact, they have heard that message, but somehow it didn't take. It was too far in the past, maybe, too foreign to relate to their lives, forgotten or discounted because it was written in a different time to a different people. But they've also forgotten how to pray. So they look to Jesus, another prophet of sorts, and ask from a place of emptiness, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Jesus holds up that prophetic mirror with a prayer for the ages: God, you are holy. Our world isn't right, and we want it to be more like yours. Give us those basic things we need, give us life. Forgive us for all those places we've gone wrong, for all those people we've done wrong. And, you know this is tough to say, forgive those folks that have hurt us, that have done us wrong, that we think owe us something. And while you're at it, Lord, have mercy.

Jesus pulls us back into relationship with that forgiveness. Just like he always does. Just like he pulls Samaritans and Canaanites into the fold. Just like widows get a starring role. Just like sinners hung on a cross still take part in that ever-realised kingdom. That's a prophet, that's one who speaks the Word of God, showing us our places of prejudice, of hesitation, of great need. But he doesn't stop there, doesn't leave us hanging with nasty names floating around our injured psyche. No, Jesus reaches out, hears our emptiness, and reminds us of God's mercy. But he also asks us to take a hard look at ourselves, a hard look at our neighbors and how we treat them, a hard look at those we refuse to see as neighbors and how we ought to treat them. And he holds us there, refusing to let us look away from that inevitable discomfort with a gentle but firm grasp. Every time we begin to say "Our Father..." we look there. Every time we open a page of the gospel, we look there. Every time we baptize a baby or share a cup of wine, we look there.

Now, I'm not trying to say that Star Trek is a prophet of Biblical standards, but like those prophets it does force its viewers to look where they probably wouldn't look otherwise, shifts us right out of our comfort zones, builds compassion for The Other, and forces us to question our definition of "neighbor" as our power to reach others continues to expand. Maybe it is just human nature to feel a little more when our gaze is directed to someone we know, someone we want to see, someone whose name we know. And there's probably a piece of that that's just fine. Reaching farther than our own neighborhood can be tricky and exhausting, but, while that very real need for self-preservation cannot be ignored, our neighborhoods have expanded, and our reach on this planet has become greater than most of us can actually fathom. And our silences in the midst of this ever-expanding definition of neighbor and that new neighbor's pain are becoming all too apparent. Maybe it is just human nature to feel a loss more keenly when it's the loss of a friend.

But is that the fullness of our nature? In other words is there room in our nature for us to feel more deeply, to feel enough for our history to unfold with a little less bloodshed, a little less violence, a little more love? See, we need that prophet's mirror to hold us up to the light, to show us that all-too-real portrait of ourselves. Now, as much as ever, we need that prophetic voice. Now, as much as ever, we need those words. So now, as much as ever, we ask again, Lord, teach us to pray.