

# The Gospel According To Doonesbury

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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"Rejoice and be glad" says Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.<sup>i</sup> I have to admit that usually my sermons are not particularly joyous or gladdening. Even less frequently are they funny. I don't stand up here and tell good jokes. Instead, I'm more often emphasizing those parts of scripture, as in today's gospel lesson, which describe the persecuted, the reviled, the poor, the hungry and thirsty, and the mournful. But periodically I'm reminded that actually the joke's on me.

When you're accepted to college these days, they usually ask a couple of questions about roommate compatibility: Do you want to be with somebody who smokes or doesn't? Do you want to be with someone who stays up late or goes to bed early? When I went to Yale in the mid-1960's there weren't any warnings about the short-term or long-term consequences of having a cartoonist for a roommate (who then might use you as a model for a bearded, redheaded, Rev. Scot figure in a nationally syndicated comic strip). But that's what happened to me. And as a consequence, I have to admit that I stand before you as a life-long joke. That used to come home to me almost daily when I was the University Chaplain at Tufts: I would continually hear student tour guides as they passed our chapel telling prospective students and their parents: "There's a Doonesbury cartoon character in there who's our University Chaplain."

Now I happen to very much admire and respect the work of my roommate Garry Trudeau; so, every so often I want to pay him homage. I know he's had a lot of fun caricaturing clergy, amongst others, over the years, often portraying clergy more as naive than wise. Actually some of the words one might use to describe his Rev. Scot character are simplistic, earnest, jargon-obsessed, and presumptuous. Yet, this character is also idealistic, passionate, hopeful, and kind. And in having fun with religion, Garry also conveys a profound spiritual message wittingly or unwittingly. I think that message is precisely what's stated by the prophet Micah in the eighth verse of chapter six, as you heard in this morning's reading: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

I got the idea of preaching about a "Gospel According to Doonesbury" from reading a book by Robert Short called The Gospel According to Peanuts,<sup>ii</sup> which finds spiritual meaning in Charles Schulz's cartoon strip. Schulz once said, "If you don't say anything in a cartoon, you might as well not draw it at all. Humor which does not say anything is worthless humor. So I contend that a cartoonist must be given a chance to do his own preaching."<sup>iii</sup> Garry Trudeau always says a lot in his cartoons (well beyond the words and deeds of his Rev. Scot), and in my opinion he's a great preacher.

To do justice: In many ways Doonesbury has become the conscience of the nation. Day in and day out in the newspaper it makes morality a public and objective matter, not just a private and subjective one. It manages to hold us all to account, often through the classic mechanism of

revealing hypocrisy. To love kindness: Doonesbury brings very diverse people together, both in its panels and in its readership -- conservative and liberal, Christian and Muslim, black and white. To walk humbly with your God: Doonesbury gores everyone's ox, revealing all of our vulnerabilities and foibles in such a way that we can smile and empathize with each other, remembering our common humanity. The Gospel of Doonesbury is threefold: Ethics and the struggle for a better world really matter (Do justice). We are all in this together (Love kindness). Let none of us take ourselves too seriously along the way (Walk humbly with your God).

One of the cartoons I have on my wall at home dates back to January of 1971, less than three months after the strip was launched. The first two frames read: "Good morning, Brother! Welcome to "The Exit," the coffeehouse where people can really relate! Reverend Scot Sloan's the name. Perhaps you read about me in "Look" [magazine]. I'm the fighting young priest who can talk to the young." Addressing a helmeted college football player and fraternity man, B.D., Rev. Scot goes on in the third frame: "My specialty, of course, is setting up dialogues. Often I am successful in getting people to look at themselves honestly and meaningfully." In the final frame B.D. speaks for the first time, saying, "Good for you, Sweetheart. One black coffee to go."<sup>iv</sup>

In the prior day's strip, Rev. Scot had been discussing plans for his coffeehouse with Michael Doonesbury: "It's just a hunch, see, but I can't help feeling you youths need someplace to come when you feel like relaxing. This coffeehouse can be the perfect milieu. Dynamic, exciting, now. And the good Lord willing, perhaps it will even turn a profit." Doonesbury asks what the profits will be used for. Rev. Scot's idealism and naivete are linked as he responds, "To wipe out poverty, hunger, hate, war, frustration and inadequate housing." All Michael Doonesbury can say at that point is "Oh."<sup>v</sup>

In the past three decades, every American President, Democrat and Republican, has been subject to Doonesbury's moral rapier, from Nixon's impeachment proceedings to Clinton's impeachment, from Carter's peanut politics to Reagan's Iran-Contra dissembling. Some have taken it more personally than others. President Ford explained, "There are only three major vehicles to keep us informed as to what's going on in Washington: the electronic media, the print media, and Doonesbury -- not necessarily in that order." President Carter recalled that "Even when it hurt to be criticized, I listened to him." President Bush the senior once said, "I had the personal feeling that I wanted to go up and kick the hell out of him, frankly."<sup>vi</sup>

As modern prophet calling us to do justice, Garry has challenged the failings of business as much as government. One cartoon in the 90's has the cigarette figure named Mr. Butts conducting a town meeting in China. He's asked, "Mr. Butts, what kind of impact are U.S. cigarettes having in Asia?" The answer is: "Dramatic! Before trade barriers were lowered, only adult men smoked. But thanks to American advertising and promotion, all that's changed. Today, throughout Asia, women are now smoking in growing numbers. In Korea, for instance, the number of teenaged girl smokers jumped 450% in one year! We're proud of that!" The questioner picks up on this: "So you're promoting fairness?" Mr. Butts replies, "Bingo! Girls were missing out on the glamour."<sup>vii</sup>

Doonesbury has also been a consistent critic of cultural trends, which dehumanize us all. For example, Rev. Scot is walking with Michael Doonesbury behind his country house one day in the mid-1980's. The minister says to Mike: "You keep telling me you can't believe there's as much hunger in America as the reports say. Well, I'm going to show you. There are an

estimated 20 million people who suffer from hunger today. It's time you met a few of them!" Michael Doonesbury responds, "Hey...Where are we?" Rev. Scot explains: "In your own backyard. And these are some of the people I work with every day, people who simply don't have enough to eat!" Doonesbury, not seeing anything beyond his yard but a meadow, lake, trees and mountains, is confused: "These are the hungry? Right here?" When Rev. Scot replies, "Yes," Doonesbury exclaims in the last frame, "But they're...They're invisible." Rev. Scot retorts, "See what I'm up against?" and a caption out of thin air reads "Maybe we should carry signs, Man."<sup>viii</sup>

In terms of Micah's second point -- loving kindness and our all being in this together -- collections of Doonesbury comics have been introduced inside their covers by commentators across the cultural and political spectrum, including Garry Wills, William F. Buckley, Jr., Gloria Steinem, and Studs Terkel.<sup>ix</sup> What medium other than Doonesbury could have put a stars-and-stripes-forever American soldier into a fast friendship with a Vietcong terrorist during the Vietnam War? In one panel, when the Vietcong explains how he longs for a bowl of his mother's rice and laments how she's worried sick about him, the American soldier responds, "Amazing...I didn't know Commies had mothers."<sup>x</sup> Who other than Garry Trudeau could have a juror explaining his feelings after a trial this way? "At first it seemed cut and dried. After all, these guys were tobacco executives! Pariahs! Case closed! But then I thought, hold on! They're not tobacco executives, they're human beings! They have families and friends! They have feelings and dreams just like other human beings! But then I thought, hold on! They're not human beings -- they're tobacco executives!" The panel ends with his wife saying, "Heavens! What a pickle!"<sup>xi</sup>

Finally, Doonesbury preaches humility. In early 1980 Rev. Scot is heading off to Iran and Michael Doonesbury asks him, "So what exactly are you planning to do in Tehran, Scot?" The minister responds: "Well, my main mission is to visit the hostages, of course, to offer them comfort and let them know they haven't been forgotten." In the next frame Rev. Scot explains, "Also, if the opportunity arises, I was thinking of overpowering one of the guards and holding off the others until I could radio for another rescue attempt." In the final frame, Rev. Scot reconsiders: "But I dunno. People might see that as just a big ego trip." Doonesbury ends the panel by saying "Yeah. You have to guard against that."

Perhaps the ultimate humility for me, as a preacher standing up here in a church, is a mid-90's cartoon depicting Michael Doonesbury and his wife J.J. talking to their school-age daughter about church. Doonesbury says, "Alex, honey, Mom and I have been talking and we've decided it's time for us to start attending church as a family..." His daughter replies, "Church? Church is boring!" Doonesbury has an answer: "Well, we thought you might say that. All kids think that..." Alex asks, "Didn't you think church was boring when you were a kid?" Doonesbury rejoins, "Well, sure, I hated going. But church was good for me, so my parents made me stick it out. You may end up hating church, too, but you have to come by that feeling honestly. You have to put in the pew time, like Mom and I did." "Oh," says Alex, looking thoughtful. Then she wonders aloud: "What if I like it?" Doonesbury looks shocked: "Like it? What do you mean?" Her mother ends the conversation by declaring, "We'll cross that bridge when we get there, honey."<sup>xii</sup>

So let me conclude by saying how much I appreciate you in this congregation who come back to church week after week, and even seem to like it -- despite that fact that there aren't

many jokes from this pulpit, at least from me. Let me also say how much I love and appreciate a cartoonist who for thirty-five years now has kept us serious about important issues in life, even as he's had the ability to keep us laughing. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."<sup>xiii</sup>

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? ... God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"<sup>xiv</sup> Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 5:12.

ii. (New York: Bantam Books, 1968).

iii. Charles Schulz, "Knowing You Are Not Alone," Decision, Vol. IV (Sept., 1963), p. 9, as quoted in Short, The Gospel According to Peanuts, p. 1.

iv. G. B. Trudeau (Universal Press Syndicate, 1971).

v. Ibid.

vi. The Presidents' quotations come from G. B. Trudeau, Flashbacks: Twenty-five Years of Doonesbury (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1995), pp. 84, 96, 228.

vii. G. B. Trudeau, In Search of Cigarette Holder Man (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1994), p. 7.

viii. Trudeau, Flashbacks, p. 194.

ix. Respectively in The Doonesbury Chronicles (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975); Doonesbury's Greatest Hits (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978); Doonesbury Dossier: The Reagan Years (New York: Henry Holt, 1984); Doonesbury Deluxe (New York: Henry Holt, 1987).

x. Trudeau, Flashbacks, p. 25.

xi. G. B. Trudeau, Doonesbury Nation (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1995), p. 27.

xii. G. B. Trudeau, In Search of Cigarette Holder Man, p. 66.

<sup>xiii</sup> Matthew 5:8.

<sup>xiv</sup> Micah 6: 6, 8.