

Proper 18B 2018 Sermon

September 9, 2018

Mark 7:24-37

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

(Much of what follows is taken from "...In the Meantime" blog of Dr. David Lose)¹

"Jesus said to the woman, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'"

Wait a minute – did Jesus just call this woman a dog? This woman who is deeply distraught over the dire condition of her little daughter? Has Jesus been caught with his compassion down, treating this woman in the same manner that most all of his fellow Jews treated Gentiles, going along with his ethnic group's prejudice, dismissing her as a dog?

To say that this statement of Jesus raises some interpretive problems is an understatement; for there is no way around the fact that what Jesus says to this suffering mother is down-right **offensive**. After all, she comes to him bowed down, in the posture of worship, begging that he cure her daughter of an unclean spirit, something we already know he can easily do. And yet he brushes her off, refusing her request and casting her aside, throwing in an ethnic slur – "dog" – just for good measure.

And the haunting question is, *why?*

Here's the *traditional* answer: Jesus is not actually *refusing* her but rather **testing** her. That is, the rebuff, the insult, the rejection – these aren't *real* at all but rather the means by which to test her faith, to see if she *really*, really believes in him. And, of course, she passes the test.

But the trouble with this interpretation is that a) nothing like it occurs anywhere else in the Gospel of Mark, b) there is no mention of testing in the story (as there is in Job, for instance), and c) it creates a rather cold-hearted picture of a God who taunts and tests us in our deepest moments of need.

So, if not this traditional interpretation, then what? Why on earth would Jesus react to someone in need in such a callous manner?

Here is an *untraditional* answer to this question: Perhaps Jesus had not yet realized the full extent of God's mission or the radical nature of the kingdom he proclaimed. He had not yet fully shed the ethnic and religious shell in which he had been raised.

Now, I know that's a somewhat uncomfortable conclusion to reach. We *want* to think of Jesus as perfect and immutable from birth, kind of like Athena springing full-grown from the head of Zeus. But if we are to take Mark's narrative seriously, never mind the incarnational and creedal affirmation that Jesus is **fully** human as well as fully divine, then perhaps we should not be surprised to see a *development* in Jesus' own recognition of God's vision for the world.

So let me pose another question: Can Jesus *learn*? Can Jesus learn?

The Bible speaks of Jesus being born a human baby, vulnerable to the cold night air, crying when hungry, and (we might expect) subject – as he grew into adolescence – to all that human teenagers go through as a result of raging hormones. If he did **not** undergo these very human normalities, could we really say he was *fully* human, as our Christian doctrine teaches? In Luke's Gospel, we read about the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple, and at the end of that story, Luke writes: "Jesus grew in wisdom and maturity." (Luke 2:52) That **must** mean that there was a time when Jesus was *less* wise and *less* mature than he later grew to be. He wasn't always **fully** wise or fully mature. Now, did his growth in wisdom and maturity stop when he reached some divinely-ordained age? 12? 18? 21? 25? Or can Jesus as an adult still learn?

If so, that opens the door to the possibility that in our Gospel story this brave Syrophenician mother actually teaches the Teacher. As Brother Curtis Almquist notes, "Where Jesus *ends up* in this Gospel story is **not** where he started."²

And so, what can **we** learn from this transformative encounter between Jesus and this Syrophenician woman?

First, I think this foreign woman teaches us about the power of the stranger. Newcomers, strangers, people who are different from us – they stretch our perspective and teach us things about themselves, about the world, and about us. But only if we will listen. And while from time to time you will meet persons as bold – or desperate – as is the woman in this story who will offer their insight to us unprompted, **more** often these folks sit at the *margins* of our faith community – *if* they enter the door at all. So we will need to reach out to them and convince them that we care about them and their perspectives. People just outside the boundary of our congregation, some whom we may have viewed in the same way as Jesus initially viewed the woman – which is to say, **not** very kindly.

Second, this woman teaches us about the nature of faith. I have no idea whether this woman believed herself worthy of God’s attention and Jesus’ time. *But I do know that she believed her daughter was.* That is, she was convinced that her precious, beloved daughter who was being oppressed by this unclean spirit was **absolutely** deserving of Jesus’ attention and so she was willing to go to great lengths to help her, even to the point of arguing with this famous teacher and healer.

And I think that’s often the case with faith. It shows itself most fully when exercised on behalf of others. We are not created to be isolated beings but rather to find our true selves most deeply in community, in relationship, and when we are advocating for another.

Third, I think the story tells us about the crucial importance of being open to continual and lifelong formation and conversion – often in surprising ways and through surprising people. Today we begin our formation programs for all ages here at Christ Church. If **Jesus** was not above growing and learning, being taught and transformed, then neither is any one of us – not matter what our age!

Finally, I think that in this story Jesus models for us the proper response when we are confronted with the fact that we might be wrong. For Jesus **immediately** *sees* and *accepts* the lesson this foreign woman – this “dog” – is teaching him – that God’s compassion doesn’t wait for some “right time” in the future and isn’t limited to certain types of people, but that the right time for compassion is always *now* and *for all*. I find **this** the most breathtaking aspect of this Gospel story: not that Jesus was *wrong* at first (the point never has been that we have to be **right** all the time), but rather the fact that Jesus *turns on a dime* when confronted with the truth! He is not *offended* by what **might** have been perceived as a rebuke from this foreign woman (and Jewish men of the First Century did not take kindly to rebukes from *any* source, let alone a foreign woman!). Rather, *immediately* recognizing God’s truth in the woman’s words, Jesus *repents*, opening to the Spirit flowing through him in a direction he had previously blocked, or perhaps

opening a channel in his heart that he didn't even know he had. And in so doing he shows us that *we can do the same*.

Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Mark are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and trust in the good news." (Mark 1:15) And in today's Gospel, Jesus shows us how it is done: He sees the Good News of God's kingdom being revealed to him through this foreign woman whom he has just dismissed and insulted, and immediately he repents and trusts the Good News!

The result is that a little girl is healed and restored to her mother, and Jesus, humble as a child (Mark 10:15, 9:37; Luke 18:17), grows once again in wisdom and maturity.

And he teaches us to do the same.

AMEN

¹ http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-15-b-what-the-syrophenician-woman-teaches/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29

² from a sermon October 8, 2013, <http://ssje.org/ssje/2013/10/08/the-changes-of-life-br-curtis-almquist/>