

Proper 18B 2021 Sermon

September 5, 2021

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."

“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 Gentile 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 Jesus’ harsh words to this suffering mother challenge our image of him as all-knowing and all-compassionate is an understatement; for there is no way around the fact that what Jesus says is **offensive**. David Lose writes, “she comes to him bowed down, ... begging that he cure her daughter of an unclean spirit... And yet he brushes her off, refusing her request and casting her aside, throwing in an ethnic slur [– ‘dog’ –] just for good measure.

“Why on earth... would Jesus react to someone in need in such a callous manner?...

“...Perhaps,” Dr. Lose suggests, “Jesus... had not yet fully shed the ethnic and religious shell in which he had been raised.”¹

Episcopal monk Curtis Almquist, who lives on the Eastern seaboard where lobsters are commonly caught, asks, “How can a lobster weighing one pound grow into a lobster weighing... ten pounds or more when the lobster has such a hard shell? How can lobsters grow when they seem... confined by their hard shell?”

Then Br. Almquist answers his own question: “When a lobster becomes crowded in its shell and cannot grow any more, by instinct it... begins to shed its shell. This is a dangerous process. The lobster has to risk its life, because once it loses its shell it becomes terribly vulnerable. It can be dashed against a reef or eaten by another sea creature... But that is the only way it can stay alive and grow. Staying trapped in a tight shell would cause the lobster’s... death.”² This is the image David Lose is conjuring when he suggests that Jesus, at the beginning of today’s Gospel story, has “not yet fully shed the ethnic and religious shell in which he had been raised.”

Now, I know that the idea that Jesus might be *wrong* in speaking so harshly is a difficult one for us Christians who have tended to emphasize Jesus’ divinity (and therefore his sinlessness) at the expense of his humanity. I imagine that most of us are inclined to think of Jesus in the way he is described in the Nicene Creed: “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God... of one Being with the Father.” All-knowing; all-compassionate. But the Creed goes on to say, “he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made *man*.” Orthodox Christian faith teaches us that Jesus was both fully God *and* fully human.

We know, for instance, that in his humanity, he was subject to the temptations of the devil during his 40 days in the desert. He was famished after fasting so long. And, like any of the thousands of other human beings who were crucified by the Romans, Jesus also felt the excruciating pain of the nails hammered into his flesh, and suffered the same agonizing death as they did. Does it not seem reasonable, then, that Jesus might also share the universal human experience of being shaped – at least to some degree – by the culture and religion of which he was a part? And we know that 1st Century Judaism did not view Gentiles, like the woman in our Gospel, in a very good light.

Now, in Luke’s Gospel, we read about the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple, sitting among the Temple teachers and asking them questions. And at the end of that story, Luke writes: “[Jesus] grew in wisdom and maturity.” (Luke 2:52) Jesus *grew* in wisdom and maturity. 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 **fully** wise or fully mature from birth. Now, did his growth in wisdom and maturity stop when he reached some divinely-ordained age? 12? 18? 21? Or can Jesus as an adult *still* learn and grow?

If the answer to that second question is, “Yes,” that opens the door to the possibility that in our Gospel story this brave Syrophenician mother actually teaches the Teacher. As Brother Almquist notes, “Where Jesus *ends up* in this Gospel story is **not** where he started.”²

My friends, there are so many teachings for us in this story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, if we are open to them. Let me mention just a few.

First, Jesus models for us *repentance*. I find **this** the most amazing aspect of this Gospel story: not that Jesus was *wrong* at first, when he dismissed and insulted the woman (the point is never that we have to be **right** all the time). What is so amazing to me is that Jesus *turns on a dime*, and repents. He is not *offended* by what *could* have been perceived as a rebuke from this foreign woman. No. The minute Jesus hears the woman’s words, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” he immediately recognizes God’s truth in what she says: recognizes 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*. In breathtaking humility, Jesus turns on a dime, sheds his hard cultural and religious shell and *repents*, opening to God’s Spirit flowing through that Gentile woman into him. And in so doing he shows us that *we can do the same*. We, too, can shed the hard shells of learned and enculturated preconceptions, and in vulnerable humility, **we** can repent and grow.

Second, this foreign woman teaches us about the gift of strangers in our lives. The New Testament Letter to the Hebrews tells us, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (13:2, *NRSV*) Was this Syrophenician woman an angel in disguise, bearing a message for Jesus? David Lose writes, “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 [Syrophenician] woman in this story who will offer their insight to us unprompted, *more* often these folks sit at the margins of our faith communities – *if* they enter the door at all. So we will need to reach out to them and convince them that we care about their opinion.”¹ Care about *them*. People just outside the boundary of our congregation, some whom *we* may have viewed in the same way that Jesus initially viewed that woman – which is to say, **not** very kindly. These strangers can bear invaluable gifts of God for us.

Third, the story of this woman relentlessly pleading on behalf of her daughter shows us that faith often reveals itself most fully when exercised for the sake of others. “We are not created to be isolated beings,” David Lose writes, “but rather to find our true selves most deeply in community, in relationship, and when we are advocating for another.”¹

Finally, I think this story tells us about the importance of being open to continual and lifelong conversion, formation, and growth – often in surprising ways and through surprising people. Earlier this morning, some of us met to brainstorm what ways we might offer opportunities for *formation* and *transformation* of our lives. Next week, several of us begin the *Faith-Seeking Journey*; on Friday, our Centering Prayer group reconvenes. If **Jesus** was not above growing and learning, being taught and transformed, then neither are we! We can continue to “grow in wisdom and maturity.”

Jesus’ first words in this 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, my friends, that’s *exactly* what Jesus does in today’s Gospel! He recognizes the Good News of God’s kingdom being revealed to him through this foreign woman whom he has just dismissed and insulted, and Jesus 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 invites **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/>