

JESUS – AND DISCRIMINATION

TEXT: Mark 7:24-37

Today's reading is one of the strangest stories we have about Jesus. Jesus, the perfect example of compassion, the one who is known for never turning anyone away, the epitome of inclusiveness, responds to a plea for help with a racial slur, with an insult. There is really no other story like this in the Bible. Well, the one exception might be Moses getting God to change God's mind. But this woman does more than get Jesus to change his mind – she rocks Jesus' world. She gets Jesus to admit for what and for whom his ministry is all about. She gets Jesus to see God for what and who God truly is.

The key dynamics of this story seem easy enough to grasp. A tired and exhausted Jesus seeks solitude. A woman hears about him and asks that he might cast a demon out of her daughter. The details here are sparse. We don't know just where they are – whose house? How did the woman hear about him? What we do know is that the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician. And we know that her brazenness in approaching Jesus broke through every traditional barrier that should have prevented her from doing so. First of all, she is a "Gentile". In other words, she is implicitly impure, one who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. Moreover, she is a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man – all taboo.

On top of all this, her daughter is possessed by a demon. Although we are not told exactly how the demon affected her daughter, we can probably guess from other stories about demon-possessed people that it was a mental illness that made her act in bizarre and anti-social ways. This woman and her daughter were not the kind of family most people would be likely to invite over for dinner.

Any way you look at it, this woman was an outsider. And what is more, Jesus actually had the nerve to say as much to her face. When the woman fell at his feet and begged him to heal her daughter, Jesus said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair

to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs". The "children" in this statement are the children of Israel, the "little dogs" are understood to be all other people.

Jesus' response is less than charitable. He dismisses and insults. Mark's Jesus here uses the Greek word for "dog" in the diminutive, but this does not mean Jesus is calling her a "very little puppy". Jesus seems unsure of the relationship between the Gentiles and the Kingdom of God. Here we see Jesus himself among those characters in the Gospel of Mark not fully living into the reality of what the Kingdom of God is like. Jesus suddenly seems reticent to distribute God's kingdom to a woman who is a Gentile. He opts instead for an epithet.

We expect Jesus to be the mature sage, the wise elder, and the compassionate healer. But in this instance Jesus' heart seems hardened when he refuses to heal a child in need. Jesus does not say that he is unable to heal the child, in fact he does heal her at the end of the story. He seems to be choosing not to heal her because, at least at this point, he seems to understand his mission to be exclusively helping his own people, his own tribe.

And this is where Jesus learns a lesson. This gentile woman takes Jesus to school. Jesus may have been fully grown into his adult height – that is, in stature – at this point in his public ministry, but he still had room to grow in wisdom and in divine and human favor. Instead of Jesus rebuking the stubborn, myopic, traditionalist religious leaders, we see a Gentile woman-in-need rebuking Jesus. And this Gentile woman harshly reminds him that God's way of love is bigger, wider, more expansive, and inclusive than any individual, tribe or nation.

Using the everyday imagery that we expect Jesus to use, she reminds him that even if the adults neglect to feed the animals, the children will often slip the pets food under the table – that is, children will often make the compassionate sacrifice that adults are too preoccupied to make.

So...Jesus was wrong. The woman was right. Jesus' life models the developmental journey that we all must take – turning from our own self-involvement, anxiety and limited perspective and move toward compassionate connection with others. Where Jesus had once felt disconnection and disgust, he suddenly felt connection and compassion. By humbling himself, admitting that the Syrophenician woman was right, and expanding his circle of compassion beyond his own tribe, Jesus models spiritual maturity for us. He shows us what it looks like to grow in wisdom and in divine and human favor, to increase our love of God and neighbor, to expand our circle of compassion, and to deepen our sense of connection to the independent web of all existence.

So the question that comes to us today is: *Who is “under the table” in our lives?* Who has been relegated to the floor, asking only for a crumb of bread or a morsel of attention? Who is God inviting you to include, to love, as if they were yourself? Who are the marginalized voices today who are speaking truth to power? Where might God be active in a way that our power structures are unable to control or domesticate?

Yes, we still have “demons” today, but they go by different names. Today's demons are named Islamophobia and homophobia; they are known as racism, sexism, ageism, and numerous other “isms” that seem to crop up and expand on a regular basis. Today's demons encompass countries and leaders who single out particular ethnic groups, even including genocide as with the Jews in Nazi Germany, the Rohingya in Myanmar, the Darfuris in Darfur, the Tutsi in Rwanda, and so many more around the world.

In today's story we meet the woman who teaches us about the power of the stranger. Newcomers, strangers, people who are different from us – that stretch our perspective and teach us things about ourselves, about the world, and about us collectively. 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 communities, if they enter the door at all. So we need to reach out to them and convince them that we are welcoming them. Who are we overlooking?

Discrimination is rampant in our world today. From the very top of our leadership we hear words denigrating foreign nationals, religious beliefs that differ from our own, human beings, including children, who break our restrictive laws in order to seek better and safer lives without fear of recrimination or even torture and death.

Who are the people around us who need our advocacy and care? I am convinced that congregational renewal does not come from figuring out what hymns we want to sing, what programs we want most, or what pastor we really deserve. Congregational renewal comes when we look around us – to our households, schools, communities, and world – to discern who needs us, what they need from us, and how we might leverage our resources to be their advocates before God and the world.

Jesus has been quoted as saying that only those who give away their lives will find it. I think that's true both in our individual and congregational experience. And I think Jesus first learned just how true that is from this fiercely loving mother. Our lesson for today is to find our voice of acceptance and love for all of God's children, and to learn, as Jesus did, that our mission field goes beyond our own tribes or likenesses, but extends to all, even as God's love knows no bounds.

One of my favorite writers puts it this way: *God, give me the courage to see my bias, and confront my racism. Give me grace to see others as persons, not objects. Give me faith to grow, trusting wisdom is not superior knowledge, but radical openness, in the spirit of Jesus, who changed. Amen*