

September 9, 2018
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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When we last heard from Mark, he was reporting on Jesus' conversation with the Judean mucky-mucks who wanted to know why the disciples were eating without washing their hands? Why were they not following "the tradition of the elders?" Why weren't they following the rules for cleanliness?

Jesus said, "there is nothing that goes into a person from the outside which can make them ritually unclean. It's what comes out of a person that makes them unclean. It's from the inside, from a person's heart, that all the evil ideas come from that lead them to do immoral things." And with that, Jesus changed the rules about how faithful people should interact with others. He changed the social boundaries for those who followed him. Who you ate with and how you ate it were no longer important. What was important was what was in your heart, not where you were born or what kind of history you had. And then almost as if to prove this point, Mark immediately follows up Jesus' teaching about what makes a person acceptable, with the story of Jesus traveling to the Gentile territory in the region of Tyre.

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We don't know why Jesus was traveling **under cover**. Maybe he was tired and needed a break. But Mark tells us that his presence didn't escape notice. Even though he was no longer on his home territory, people still knew a about him. And a woman, a Gentile, a Syrophoenician woman, came to him asking for her daughter to be healed.

She believes he can do it.

And at this point in Mark's gospel, **we know** Jesus can do it. He's cast out unclean spirits before. This isn't something he's never tried before, but Jesus tells the woman that it wouldn't be fair, to take the banquet prepared for the children and give it to the dogs.

Which seems so uncalled for. Doesn't sound very Jesusy. So why would he do such a thing?

The traditional answer has been that Jesus wasn't really refusing to help. He was just **testing** her. Or maybe he was teasing her, with a wink and a smile. The argument has been that Jesus wasn't insulting her or rejecting her. He didn't mean anything by what he said. And really, it wasn't that bad a word.

But it was.

There's no honest way to get around it. Jesus wasn't talking about a pet dog. The word that's used is *kunarion*, which sometimes meant a smaller dog like those kept indoors in other cultures; **but the Israelites didn't keep pet dogs**. Dogs were filthy animals to the Israelites, something like a cross between a hyena and a rat. They were often put in the same group as pigs and were seen as worthless scavengers. So, when Jesus talks about throwing food to the dogs, he's not talking about feeding family pets or sneaking a little treat to your puppy under the table. He's talking about taking your good food that you have prepared for your family off the table, walking it outside and throwing it in the gutter so that the scavengers that are rooting through the garbage and maybe even eating the corpses of other dead animals can dine on what you prepared for your children.

And the children in this analogy are the Israelites. The woman, begging Jesus to care for her child, isn't even human in this metaphor.

To interpret what Jesus is saying as being innocuous and harmless just doesn't work. There's nothing in the text to back up the argument. Yet, it's atypical behavior for Jesus. He doesn't act this

way with anyone else. And there's nothing that says that Jesus was testing her or making a joke. It's not like the story of Job, when God and Satan agree to see what happens when Job loses everything.

This story paints a picture of Jesus that just seems wrong. Why would he taunt and test someone when they were desperate for help? Is this really the God that we follow? Why would Jesus be so unfeeling?

The untraditional conclusion that some have come to, is that maybe Jesus hadn't quite gotten to the point of realizing how wide open the kingdom of God really was. Maybe he hadn't seen how wildly radical the good news was and that it wasn't just for the Jews, but for the whole world. It's an awkward position to take- thinking that Jesus didn't have it all together or that he might change his mind about the size of the kingdom of heaven.

Pastor David Lose says, "We want to think of Jesus as full-bodied, perfect, and [unchangeable] from birth, kind of like Athena springing full-grown from the head of Zeus. But if we are to take Mark's narrative seriously...then perhaps we should not be surprised to see a development in Jesus' own recognition of God's vision for the world. After all, the profoundly expansive notion of a kingdom that included *everyone* – **[with] no exceptions** was completely and totally novel....

"...If we can imagine that this woman didn't simply pass a clever test but instead, and as Jesus himself says, demonstrated profound faith – then maybe we might be able to acknowledge that this brave mother taught the Teacher and, therefore, might have some things to teach us as well."

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So what might we learn?

If this twist on interpreting Mark's telling of the story is the reality of what happened, then clearly, we are called to be open and gracious to all of God's children, but before we can get to that place, we need to listen.

Rather than ignoring someone that the rules said he should never speak to – a gentile, an unknown woman, in public – Jesus listened. And in listening, he allowed himself to be changed. His engagement with that faithful mother gave him a new vision of her, of those that were different from himself and perhaps a new sense of himself as well.

Like the woman in Tyre, the man Jesus meets in Sidon is also an outsider. He has been cut off from the world by his inability to hear and communicate with other people. But this time, Jesus doesn't hesitate to respond to the request for help.

It's a weird little story, with Jesus spitting and touching the man's tongue, but when he calls for the man to "be opened!" he can, quite immediately, hear and speak. He is physically made well, and he is also able to be a full participant in the life of his community. Which is great news for him!

Professor Elizabeth Johnson writes, "it must be said that Jesus does not leave any of us in a state of beggarliness. He seats us at the table and claims us as God's beloved children -- children from every tribe and language and nation. Even crumbs from the table would be enough for our healing and salvation. But Jesus has given more than enough. He sets an abundant, life-giving feast for all."

Which sounds great unless you're wondering why you aren't well.

Or why someone you love is suffering?

Would that a few little crumbs might be tossed this way.

So what else can we learn? Or remember?

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Our reading from Isaiah begins with a command to speak- to proclaim words that remedy weakness and conquer fear. Anthea Portier-Young says that the phrase the NRSV translates as “those who are of a fearful heart” in verse 4, is not a bad translation, but a more literal rendering of the Hebrew phrase would be “ones whose hearts are racing.” Also, the Hebrew word *naqam*, which is translated as “vengeance” refers to retribution by a legitimate authority. And in this case, it has the further emphasis of being *retribution that brings freedom to those who are oppressed*. It has to do with freedom from a situation of need. Its meaning is closer, then, to what we call “restorative justice” than to “vengeance.” Portier Young goes on to do further translation with the result being this: “Say to the people, God is here. Restorative justice is on its way. Hope now in God's dealing. Expect God's response.”

And that, my friends is good news. When we ask for Jesus’ help - when we pray for the Spirit’s presence – when we ask God to mend that which is broken and heal those who are ill – we have been told to expect a response.

We have been promised that God is here and is working to make things right, in this place, at this very moment. God is working for restoration, repair, healing and transformation. So, when we come to God in prayer, with our hearts racing, because of what we are fighting or what we are running from. When our hearts are racing so fast that we can hardly move or speak – God is already working for our restoration.

We have good cause for hope. In the words of the prophet and in the words of Christ. And so, we come today asking for God’s blessing and rightfully expecting a response. It may not be the response we ask for, and that’s sometimes a hard truth to face. But God will answer, and God is here. So, do not be like those without hope. Trust in God, who is always on your side.