

Mark 7:24-37

Does anyone see anything strange in today's gospel reading?

I love playing in the sandbox of the Gospels... so I really want to focus on the one line that causes the most disruption for us today...

He calls a woman seeking help for her child... a dog or in our vernacular that would be a female dog... That's the B Word here! Interesting... Jesus called her what?! Now what's that all about?

So there's the women's side and then there's Jesus' side...

Let's look at the context to unpack what's going on here.

Jesus is now taking his disciples on a road trip to show them how to walk the talk. To put into practice that which he has been teaching them in their hometown region of Galilee. And Jesus not only taught by words but would then would demonstrate in actions how he wanted His disciples to act...and today's story is no different...

First Jesus shows the racial bigotry that was expected of a Jew when confronting an "outsider". But instead of Jesus being confronted by prejudice in return... he is confronted by the pleas of a mother for her child, a woman who seems to know who he is even better than His own students... The disciples haven't fully grasped yet who this Jesus is...

Let's look at THE WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE FIRST:

A desperate cry for help from a mother for her sick child overrides any racial prejudices she may have for this Jew... and Jesus seems to be caught with his own compassion down...forced to confront even His own prejudices. In a reversal of roles, the respected teacher learns from an outsider the need to broaden His own ministry of hospitality to those outside His own tribe...the house of Israel...thank God for us.

This woman comes to Jesus with the unshakable conviction that God's mercy and love is big enough even for her and her daughter. Remember in the feeding stories that were just performed there were always left overs...even the crumbs are enough she says...God's grace is so abundant that even the dogs have their fill.

With delight Jesus commends her great faith and grants her request. So what's this have to do with us? Well...How do we let our own traditions and rules and prejudices get in the way of our relationships with God and with others?

From the Epistle we just read paraphrasing:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in Jesus? For if a person with wealth comes here, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Welcome" while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have we not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges? We would all do well if we would just love our neighbors as ourselves."

This encounter between Jesus and this woman represents for us in Mark's gospel the ultimate outsider... She has no worth, not even given a name and shows us how our traditions can keep up our "holy fences"!

There's us and then there's them! Those worthy of Jesus, and those who are not! And Jesus once again acts out God's mercy and love despite what everyone expected. He's traveling in outsider territory here...and Mark is asking his own community... what would it mean to follow Jesus into unclean territory where THOSE other people live out there?

What would it mean for the faithful to fret less over traditions and listen to those crying out for God's love and mercy outside these sacred walls?

What's amazing to me is that this woman doesn't even allow Jesus and His traditions get in the way of God's saving help! Think about that... The ways of the Torah, even the ways of Jesus... are never to be a barrier to the grace of God for ALL God's children.

You all getting this yet? This woman is very aware of how she is viewed... and where she is and who she is... yes Lord even us dogs have to eat.

God's new covenant stretched the length of a cross so that no one would be excluded from the God's love. And we are also to live out that calling... to go...and bring God's mercy, love and healing to all... especially to those at the margins...especially where THOSE other people live - out there.

And perhaps this mother's cry for help moves Jesus into focusing on these outsiders sooner than He had wished.

In saying "Let the children be fed first," Jesus implies that they just need to wait their turn...but for now his work was only to the Jewish community.

His answer is not really "NO," but rather "Not just yet." And this seems in line with the story Mark is telling. Can the divine be persuaded to change His mind about something...by the way we see this throughout the Bible as well don't we? God is indeed relational! And God does change God's mind...look at the exchanges between God and Abraham.

In any case, immediately after leaving Tyre... Jesus' own work NOW changes direction. He then cures a deaf man, then feeds 4000 Non-Jewish people in the Decapolis.

His timeline gets accelerated; gentiles now start receiving blessings too. This woman's persistence benefits more than just one little girl. Her persistence persuades Jesus to do new things and to venture into new places with His ministry.

And her theology doesn't originate in books or study...her faith is expressed painfully and authentically in a mother's love for her sick child.

Who says desperation and tenacity aren't the same thing as faith...especially when brought to the feet of Jesus? For Mark, "faith" is hardly about getting Jesus' name or titles right or articulating the proper doctrine. It's rather about clinging to Jesus and expecting him to heal, to restore, and to save. The things God promised that God would do.

Now What's up with Jesus here today!? A little out of character!

Our Gospel reading this morning is from Mark chapter 7, where we come across a very tired Jesus... I think to the point of exhaustion.

This is not the sort of depiction of Jesus we usually see... I've never seen a stained-glass window with an image of Jesus sleeping. We never portray him trying to get away from people to catch some rest. For those of you who have been caring for folks who are suffering... or even the day to day caring of children, or even animals...when they get sick it is exhausting!

The Gospel stories make clear to us that Jesus ate and drank, and that He got tired and needed rest. Indeed, if you know the stories he kept seeking solitude and he even fell asleep in a boat in the middle of a storm...that's exhaustion.

I'm sure some of you have known that level of tiredness. I used to fall asleep with my children actually playing on my stomach when I would come home from work.

In Mark Chapter 7 Jesus is tired, and if you read between the lines, you pick up that it's not only that Jesus is exhausted... but He is also dealing with the fact that his cousin, John the Baptist, has just been brutally killed.

We know that Jesus loved John, and we know that when Jesus heard about John's death, He then tries to go away to a lonely place, and rest.

If you follow the story through Mark's Gospel, you'll know that Jesus' immediately attempted to find a lonely place to grieve, yet was frustrated once again by another large crowd that managed to beat him to His resting spot!

That story was in the previous Chapter 6, and Jesus, we are told, had compassion on those people. He felt sorry for them and so He taught them, and He fed them!

And then He tries to get away a second time... even from His own disciples - sending them off while He went 'into the hills' to pray. But it was the distress of His disciples at sea that now forced Jesus to once again postpone His much-needed time-out.

And now we come across Jesus making a third attempt to try to get some Rest. And He heads off to Tyre and Sidon (that's Southern Lebanon), a really out of the way place for a Jew...hoping that at least here his reputation hasn't proceeded him... out here in the sticks.

And yet a local woman finds him and asks Him to heal her daughter. But Jesus tells her to go away! Notice the Gospel writer seemed to NEED to include this fact for us.

The one thing I love about Jewish scripture writers both OT and NT is that they always keep everything in...they don't sugar coat people...Moses was a murderer and David was an adulterer...and they leave it all in. Because being human is never a black and white, good and bad affair is it...Our human experience, as you know, can be very, very grey.

And whether we see Jesus as offensive or not in this moment, we know how the story turns out. The woman's persistence is rewarded! And this interaction with this strong Lebanese woman, and her love for her child puts an end to any hope of Jesus just resting...Now he appears to move out of that region as soon as he heals her daughter.

'He has done all things well', they said. And so the crowds gather once again around Him, and all hope of rest vanishes.

And so our passage this morning ends with Jesus, standing in the middle of a crowd of very excited people who are proclaiming His greatness, while He is pleading with them not too.

In many instances Jesus orders the crowds and his own disciples not to tell anyone. He who had the ability to heal diseases, cast out demons, calm the raging seas and feed thousands did NOT have the ability to stop people from talking about him... You see where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is always energy and activity buzzing about!

Wherever you see Jesus moving you see a fair degree of craziness following in His wake! People get healed, communities get stirred up, political leaders get upset, and everyone is talking about it...it goes viral!

Whether it was His hometown of Nazareth, his neighboring town of Capernaum, or the bustling city of Jerusalem or somewhere out in the sticks like Lebanon, wherever Jesus goes, there is healing...there is new life...there is also turmoil...there is controversy...there is the energy of God's Spirit at work!

Maybe that's why our own lives can seem chaotic at times... Maybe the reason we never truly get settled is because the Spirit of God is at work around us!

We keep thinking if we could only just get more resources... more time... more help... vacation... then perhaps we can get a handle on things... but that's not how it usually works... does it?

In fact, the only way to live a quiet, settled life is to get the Spirit of God out of the picture all together... in fact we do that a lot (it's called cocooning today) Growing and transforming is not for the faint of heart. But it is how one truly lives! And where the Spirit of God is... there is activity... there is controversy... there is plenty of room for misunderstanding, pain and difficulty, because motion, energy and some chaos are always part of the equation.

Like I like to say...You all want to experience God in your life?

Well be careful what you wish for!

If you persist with following this Jesus, you will find healing, community, joy and life...But you will also find disruption...and one more thing – you may get very tired! I know this all too well...Are you tired? Well, welcome to living and discipleship!

“Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” “Good Answer!” “Go on home sister...your daughter is healed!

Labels no longer matter when you come to feast at the Lord’s Table. Neither Jew nor Gentile... male nor female... rich nor poor...black nor white, gay nor straight...liberal nor conservative...NO ONE will go hungry... no one is excluded... God’s love is big enough for us all!

Today many churches start to get back to work for the coming year...so get involved...go feed the hungry...bring love to the margins and yes... go get tired!

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ we have all been given a new label...a new name. Beloved...Children of God!

And like any good parent we will give our children our unconditional love and what they need...even sometimes to the point of exhaustion!

Welcome to the kingdom. Do not let your own fears and prejudices ever get in the way of feeding our estranged brothers and sisters nor from keeping them from experiencing God’s love as well through us.

Beloved...Go now and Be Love for one another... and Bring love to All God’s children...even those people out there in the sticks!

Your faithful servant,

carmen