

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
September 8, 2024 – 16 Pentecost  
Mark 7:24-37; James 2:1-17  
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New Testament scholars agree that in Mark's Gospel we find the most human of the Gospel portrayals of Jesus. We see that in this morning's account of an exorcism. Jesus' reputation as a healer was becoming widely known. A Gentile woman, a non-Jew, whose "little daughter had an unclean spirit" had heard about Jesus and sought him out. The woman humbled herself before Jesus and "begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter." His response shocks our sense of who Jesus is.

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus was declaring that his mission of healing and salvation was to the Jews, "the children." To give to non-Jews was as bad as throwing food to dogs. This was a highly insulting comparison. In the ancient world dogs were viewed as shameless and unclean animals. Insulted by Jesus as she was, this woman might have gone away silently and in shame. Perhaps empowered by love of her daughter, the woman refused to give up. Instead, she debated with Jesus, still addressing him with respect: "Sir," – the Greek word translated "sir" also means "lord" – "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus recognized truth in her words and replied, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter."

Christians have been uncomfortable with Jesus' initial brutal reply to this Gentile woman all through the centuries. A variety of strategies have been used to try to explain away Jesus' answer. Here are a few. Jesus was smiling and looking with compassion on the woman while he said these dreadful words, so it was obvious to her that he didn't mean what the words seem to convey. Or this, Jesus knew how brilliantly the woman would respond to him, so he set the situation up to let her shine. Or this, the exchange gives us an example of faith that doesn't waver even when God is apparently ungracious, so it's a good lesson that Jesus provides. All these are rather unlikely interpretations that preserve our image of Jesus as good and always compassionate.

Though this passage may make us uncomfortable, I think it is important because here we see clearly the humanity of Jesus. He lived in a particular time and place and was born into a particular culture and faith tradition. His understanding of the world was shaped by these factors. Not bound, but shaped. Jesus understood his mission as being to the Jews, his people, "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:6). That mission was quite a full job. As a prophet, Jesus needed to confront Jewish religious leaders about their understanding of God and God's commandments, about how they were teaching and leading the people. Jesus had a message of salvation to preach and good news to share with the poor. He was a healer with crowds of people coming to him for healing and exorcism. He had to travel through the places where Jews lived to spread the word of the kingdom of God. Wasn't this enough to do, without extending his mission to the Gentiles?

Mark tells us that Jesus traveled north of Galilee to the region of Tyre. This was Gentile territory, not Jewish territory. Tyre was a major city, and the people of Tyre were supplied with produce from the Galilean countryside. Some of this produce likely came from Jews. The people of Tyre were economically superior to the people of Galilee. Jesus was going into an area where relations between the Gentiles and the Jews were already strained because of the economic situation.

When Jesus arrived at a house in the region of Tyre, Mark tells us that he "did not want anyone to know he was there." Perhaps he was weary from his journey. Perhaps he needed time for solitude and prayer. He may have been irritable because "he could not escape notice."

All this is part of the human background of our story. What "saves" this exchange between Jesus and the Gentile woman is his response when she says "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." Here is where we find a model for ourselves. Our Gospel lesson shows us that when the Syrophenician woman held up a mirror for Jesus to look into, he looked and saw and changed. By healing the woman's daughter, he

tacitly admitted that his concept of his God-given mission had been too narrow. Jesus then expanded his mission to the Gentiles. He healed Gentiles as well as Jews. He responded to the call to care for more people, to include more people in the definition of “God’s people,” and his disciples would go on to spread the good news of Christ to all nations. The direction of change is important and a model for the followers of Jesus today – to extend compassion and healing to a wider circle of people in need.

Christians often say that our direction in life is to grow into the likeness of Christ. This is one aspect of that likeness. Jesus shows us by his example that we are meant to look at ourselves honestly, see what needs to be changed, and do something about it. Of course, we need to find a place to start whenever we want to change something about ourselves. Sometimes an encounter with another person – like Jesus with this Gentile woman – prompts us to take an honest look at ourselves, and we then see where we need to begin to change. Sometimes the consequences of our behavior are so painful or costly that we recognize what exactly we must change. Sometimes the wisdom of others gives us a clue about where we are currently “missing the mark.”

We might consider using The Letter of James as a tool to help us identify an area where we might work on change. This letter is like a sermon which offers guidance about ethical living based on contemporary Jewish religious thought. The letter certainly names quite a few specific faults to avoid. The five chapters of The Letter of James guide us to consider anger; “bridling our tongues” or being mindful of what we say; the extent of our charitable giving to vulnerable people in need; envy; selfish ambition; judging others; doing what we know to be right; cheating people who do work for us; and grumbling against one another. Quite an extensive variety of human failings! Something for everyone!

This morning’s lesson points out that we should not “dishonor the poor,” and by stating that faith without works is dead, the author invites us to examine our “works.” Does our behavior in fact reflect our faith or is there a disconnect that needs repair?

I recently read an interesting book entitled “Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well.” It was written by Pierre Wolff, a former Jesuit and now an Episcopal priest who has written extensively on discernment and Ignatian spirituality. “Discernment” is essentially a process we engage in to attempt to understand how God wants us to live, especially when we face important decisions in life.

Wolff helped me expand my idea of “the poor,” and I want to share his insight with you. We know that God wants us to care for the poor. In fact, Wolff sees the final test of any decision we make to be “the way we see the poor, hear their cries, and serve them.” We often think of the poor primarily in economic terms. But Wolff invites us to see that in any situation and in every relationship among human beings, one person is in “a state of inferiority, lack, vulnerability, or powerlessness that makes him or her the poorest one in the circumstance. Therefore, this person must be given a priority in the working out of the decision” (pages 109-110).

Think about how this might change our way of viewing situations with our fellow human beings, not only at times of decision-making but every day. We would look at others with eyes to discover who was most vulnerable or weakest, powerless or poor, who in some way needed the most care. We would look so that we could respond with compassion. In a world where people brag about their strengths, this is very counter-cultural, as Jesus’ teaching so often is!

Speaking for myself, the habit of viewing others in the way that Wolff suggests would be a powerful antidote to the contempt I sometimes feel for others and know to be wrong. This habit would also magnify my gratitude to God for all the blessings I have been given. And finally, I would hope that in situations where I find myself the most vulnerable – in a medical emergency, for example – such a habit of seeing human relationships might help me accept the help and compassion of others more graciously.

Sometimes when we hear or read the Bible, we need to work at finding its relevance to our lives. A quick, surface reading is often not enough. But if we think and pray, we discover that God’s Word speaks to us profoundly today, as it has to countless other God-lovers over time. In Jesus’ name. Amen.