

Text: Mark 7: 24-37
Title: Changing Jesus
Date: 09.06.09
Roger Allen Nelson

It reads like Jesus was going on a retreat.

He'd calmed a storm and walked on water.
He'd cast out demons and raised a dead girl.
He'd healed lepers and paralytics.
He'd gathered and taught disciples.
He'd fed five thousand.

And, now he was headed to a seaside village for a retreat.
Maybe he was weary and worn and wanted some down time.
Maybe the breezes off the Mediterranean, the quiet cool of the evenings,
and the beauty of the coast would give him a place to rest, reflect, re-orientate, retreat...

Whatever the reason, the text reads that Jesus made his way to Tyre. Tyre was outside of Israel, an arduous forty mile hike northeast of the cluster Jewish villages around the Sea of Galilee.

Now, that's a long way to go for a retreat, but Jesus crossed over the border into Gentile territory and it was there that a woman approached him. In Mark's account she is, "a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia..." That seems a little heavy handed. It is like saying, "Jesus went to Montreal and a woman came to him who was French Canadian born in Quebec." It could be that all Mark was doing was pointing out the multiple strikes against the woman. She was the wrong gender,

the wrong religion,
the wrong ethnicity,
the wrong nationality,
and in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But, this woman, prompted by the desperation of a demon possessed daughter, ignores the strikes, reaches across the boundaries and pleads for Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus may have crossed the border, but the woman is the real boundary breaker.

We spent the first week of my recent trip to Israel in the hill country around the Sea of Galilee. Our guide was Claudia of Magdala ~ I'll never read the name Mary Magdalene the same again. Claudia is (I'm guessing) in her mid-thirties; a single mom with two children. She has thick wavy jet black hair, olive complexion, and dark bright eyes ~ usually covered with sun glasses under an Atlanta Braves baseball hat. She describes herself as an Arab-Israeli-Christian. Fluent in German, Italian, English, Arabic and Hebrew, she was the first Christian woman to be licensed by the Israeli government as a guide. She has a formidable will, a quick wit, and a deep love for her country.

Claudia said a couple different times that it was against the law to convert. Now, I don't know exactly what she meant by that, but I do know that the boundaries of religious and

ethnic identity were a stark, immovable, impenetrable, social reality. You felt it all the time. People were defined by their family, religion, and ethnicity. There were Jews, Palestinians, Bedouins, Muslims, Christians, and Druze ~ each with their own restrictions and responsibilities.

Claudia's take was that those were firmly fixed boundaries. You were who you were. There was no fluidity or conversion; there was no changing teams. There was only modest interaction. She said that those who come from a melting pot that cherishes the rights and champions the will of the individual have a hard time understanding the fixed quality of this ethnic religious landscape.

It struck me that the evangelical notion of an individual purpose driven life as eternally meaningful is a sort of incomprehensible gibberish when the strongest social forces are family and tribal belonging.

That dynamic is part of what makes this exchange with Jesus so fascinating. The woman had no business asking Jesus anything. This was unthinkable. This was a radical long shot driven by the desperation of a mother's love. This was the damning of cultural convention in the hopes of compassion.

And yet...

And yet...

And yet, Jesus' first response is to ignore her.

Mark's version doesn't pick up that detail, but Matthew records that the woman addresses Jesus with dignity and great formality. "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

And yet, Jesus doesn't say a word. He ignores her and the disciples ask if he could send her way, as if she was making a scene, causing a ruckus, and disrupting their mid-afternoon Mediterranean margaritas under the shade of the eucalyptus trees.

Now you would think that this would be a prime teachable moment. Jesus could show his disciples that compassion trumps intrusion and mercy bests the socio-religious order. You could think that, but you would be wrong, because Jesus' next response was to call the woman a name. He doesn't say it directly, but he does speak about her. It may have been a common saying, but in reference to mercy for her sick daughter Jesus says that the children should eat all they want and not toss their bread to the dogs.

There is delightful scholarly debate about the nature of those dogs. Some suggest that Jesus uses a term for a small house dog or a puppy ~ and therefore the reference is a little softer. Who doesn't love a puppy? Jesus is still calling her dog ~ but a cute one. Others are clear that this is not your neighbor's cuddly collie that does tricks at the table for the last cheese-curl ~ rather this is a reference to the scavenger dogs that roamed the streets and lived off of the garbage. It is a disparaging, derogatory, and dismissive metaphor that was used in reference to Gentiles.

By the way, early one morning while running around the outside of the city walls of old Jerusalem I woke up a pack of these dogs. I startled them, they startled me, and as I turned and ran like a junior high girl I picked up a big rock to fend off the one that was chasing me...

But, the woman was not so easily put off. With a dogged determination she keeps nipping at Jesus' heels. Maybe with a sly smile or as a last gasp she counters that even the dogs get the crumbs that fall off the family table. She begs for the table scraps.

Now, dear friends, clearly this is not the Jesus of Sunday school flannel boards and bible-story-books. At face value the text reads of a Jesus who is rude, indifferent, and quite frankly, at least initially, a little cruel....

So, what are we to make of it?

Is Jesus testing the woman? Is he toying with her to determine how deep her faith is? Is he offering a typical rabbinical response and setting the table so that he can change the expected outcome? Or, is he simply stating the facts? "First things first: I came first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. Your time is coming...."

What are we to make of it?

Well, what if the woman changes Jesus. Could this exchange be stretching Jesus to recognize that his word, his way, and his work extends beyond the Jews to even the Gentiles? By her chutzpah and a crafty response the woman teaches Jesus. To quote a reformed scholar:

If Jesus really did think at some point he was supposed to limit himself to Israel that was no sin. Maybe part of what it meant for Jesus to be fully human was that he had the genuine ability to learn, that he willingly allowed limitations to be placed on his own knowledge, even as for the time he was on this earth he allowed himself to be limited to being in just one place at a time, instead of being everywhere at once as is normally the case with God.

It is not essential to the story, it is a tangential issue, but it is a remarkable passage which illuminates the mystery of how Jesus could simultaneously be fully human and fully divine. How could Jesus be wholly human, and by definition be limited, while at the same time be wholly God, and by definition be limitless? It is not essential to the story, but is it possible that Jesus was stretched, challenged, and changed by a Gentile woman?

For...in response to her comeback Jesus heals the woman's daughter. This is one of the few places where the healing is from a distance. There is no touching, no spittle, no breath. Jesus wills it, the demon is driven out, and he simply tells her to go home and find her daughter healthy. Matthew writes that Jesus said, "Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted." And, this unnamed, courageous, persistent, barrier breaker goes home to her daughter who is already demon free and resting in bed.

So, what are we to make of it?

Paired with previous story, the text from last week, about the ritual hand washing rules and the questions about whether you are soiled from what comes outside of you or from what is inside of you. Mark could be throwing the doors wide open. Let the dogs in! There is no food that unclean and there are no people that are unclean. The grace of Jesus Christ extends to all. Thanks be to God!

And, in a world defined by Jew and Gentile, Palestinian and Israeli, Muslim and Christian, that is remarkable good news.

An essay by William Willimon was helpful for this section...

But, what if there is also here an essential first breath of faith.

The woman who comes to Jesus has nothing to offer,

No basic beliefs,
no theological understanding,
no life of piety,
no clarity of conviction,
no rights or rites.

She only has her desperation. Out of hope and out of options she doesn't know where else to turn, so she kicks down the barriers and pleads for mercy at the feet of Jesus.

William Willimon writes that is where faith begins. In his words:

...when she presses in upon Jesus, and he turns toward her, this is the center of faith. When human need becomes desperate, heated, white-hot and frantic. When human need and divine compassion meet, this is faith.

...The woman said, Lord, never mind about the puppies, or the fact that I am a heathen. My daughter is sick, help. And Jesus said this is the beginning place, this is why I came into world. This may not be the end of the journey with Jesus; it may be where the journey begins.

Dear friends, you may not feel desperate this morning. You may not feel like a dog scavenging for scraps. You may not feel like you need healing. But, my guess is that there are some sitting around you who do. And, my guess is that there will be times and places in your life when you will too.....

The good news is that there is place at the table for you.

And, that first breath of faith is breathed over and over and over again.

And, Jesus came into the world to heal and defeat all that is evil.

And, the mercy and compassion of Jesus is boundless ~ even to dogs like us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.