

The Syrophenician woman; Mark 7:24-37; 15th Sunday after Pentecost

When I preached in July, I spoke about Jesus' compassion, even though he was frustrated that he could not get away from the crowds. Today, we'll talk about the opposite of compassion: impatience and derogation, expressed to another.

Again, Jesus was trying to find a few moments of peace, going to a house north of the Sea of Galilee, in what today is Lebanon, a mixed area of Gentiles and Jews. But, again, he could not get away. The people knew he was there.

A common experience in life for most of us: it may be email, a phone call, a text message, an acquaintance we see at the grocery store, or a child or grandchild wanting our attention. We're tired, perhaps feeling a bit overwhelmed, and someone asks us to do something, or asks us a question, or asks for help; an interruption or request that we just don't have time for in our schedule. Sometimes we take a deep breath and deal with the situation with at least a modicum of grace. But then there are those other times when we respond in a harsh or insensitive way. I know I have, to folks sitting here today.

This was one of those other times for Jesus. He was trying to find a quiet place, but he could not escape notice. And then a Gentile woman with an ill daughter at home suffering seizures, fell at Jesus' feet, begging for help. She was a Greek speaking woman from the coast around Tyre and Sidon, and Jesus probably talked to this Syrophenician woman in Greek.

Jesus' response was what our's might have been: wait your turn, woman. Only Jesus said it this way:

The children have to be fed first.

It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.

Ouch! Jesus said 'no' and would seem to have called the woman a dog; as dismissive and demeaning an expression in the first century as it is in ours. And he express no sympathy, no compassion.

But there is more to the story. The woman may have fallen at Jesus' feet, but

she was no shrinking violet. She said to Jesus, in what must be one of the greatest comebacks of all time:

Lord, (and she's the only person in Mark's gospel to call Jesus Lord). Lord even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

A perfect response, an answer not arising from anger, one-upmanship; not argumentative or pleading. And Jesus thought so too:

Good answer!" he said. "Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter.

We have trouble with this story, which is also told in the Gospel of Matthew. It is cited as an example of faith and an affirmation that Jesus' message was for Gentiles as well as Jews. And that it is, but that was not the tenor of Jesus' response, which was dismissive and demeaning. And this makes us uncomfortable.

Some commentators have suggested that Mark's original wording has been modified by early, ultraconservative Jewish Christians wanting to undercut the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Others suggest that the point is that the rich gentiles from the coast cannot demean and abuse the peasant Jews who live in the region. (This explanation ignores the fact the woman fell at Jesus' feet and begged, and that she refers to Jesus as "Lord.") Others have excused Jesus by saying the Syrophenician woman upset Jesus by speaking directly to him rather than having her request spoken by a male member of her family. Still other interpreters have said Jesus just used a common saying, an aphorism, with which everyone was familiar.

I would suggest we miss some important lessons by dancing around and trying to soften Jesus' response. The problem with the response is in its words and tone, and seeming obliviousness about the distress of the woman to whom it was expressed. It is not the response of the Jesus' of our childhood; not the words of Gentile Jesus. In fact, if you or I had said it in those circumstances, we might be criticized as having given a sinful response; a response that would tend to prevent or sever any relationship with the woman.

Why does Jesus' understandable but insensitive response upset us? Official Church doctrine, since the fourth century has said that Jesus was fully human and fully God. That is the bottom line of the Creed we will say together. Our tendency, however, has always been to focus on and emphasize the divinity part, and overlook the implications of Jesus' humanity. The paradox of the incarnation is uncomfortable; we find Jesus' humanity threatening. We're just worried about establishing that Jesus is God.

But would Jesus be fully human if he didn't respond to the Syrophenician woman as the Gospels of Mark and Matthew tell the story? Surely, he was repeating what he learned at home. And shouldn't we recognize the Syrophenician woman as more than a rhetorically gifted, pushy woman? Doesn't she serve, in our reading, as a prophet, in the Old Testament tradition? She, a Gentile woman, teaches Jesus, the Jewish man, the true meaning and implications of what Jesus he has just told his followers, as we read in last Sunday's reading from Mark's gospel: social convention should not stand in the way of proclaiming the Gospel by helping those in need.

In reply to the woman's response to Jesus, Jesus acknowledges the wisdom of her response, and I would suggest, by implication, the shortcomings of his response to her request. And then he heals her daughter, a Gentile child.

Confession and reconciliation.

We make the same kind of mistake Jesus made in times of weariness, stress, anger. While we may not be able to physically heal, as Jesus did, to make the situation right, we can acknowledge the inappropriateness of our action to the person we have mistreated, and, depending on the circumstances, take steps to restore the broken or damaged relationship. That is the lesson at the heart of today's gospel reading, a message that we miss if we try to rewrite the story.

I don't know all the implications of Jesus' humanity. And I agree we should read the gospels, with our eyes of faith. But that is quite different from reading scripture filtered by 4th and 5th century theology. We should start with the words of

scripture, read in their context, not with our theology.

I'll close this homily with the words of the Gathering Song with which we began our worship today, fitting words for our gospel reading and for those about to depart Tuesday for Turkey and Iraq:

Help is to see the Face of Christ in everyone we meet.

Help us to see the Face of Christ in stranger and in friend.

Help us to be the Face of Christ to everyone we meet.

Help us to be the Face of Christ to stranger and to friend.

Amen

September 6, 2015

125 *Qui confidunt*

- 1 Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, *
which cannot be moved, but stands fast for ever.
- 2 The hills stand about Jerusalem; *
so does the Lord stand round about his people,
from this time forth for evermore.
- 3 The scepter of the wicked shall not hold sway over the
land allotted to the just, *
so that the just shall not put their hands to evil.
- 4 Show your goodness, O Lord, to those who are good *
and to those who are true of heart.
- 5 As for those who turn aside to crooked ways,
the Lord will lead them away with the evildoers; *
but peace be upon Israel.

Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23

22A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.

2 The rich and the poor have this in common:
the Lord is the maker of them all.

8 Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

9 Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

22 Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;

23 for the Lord pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

James 2:1-18

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2My brothers and sisters,* do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet',* 4have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.* Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 9But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 11For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery', also said, 'You shall not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters,* if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

Mark 7:24-37 (CEB)

24 Jesus left that place and went into the region of Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know that he had entered a house, but he couldn't hide. 25 In fact, a woman whose young daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard about him right away. She came and fell at his feet. 26 The woman was Greek, Syrophenician by birth. She begged Jesus to throw the demon out of her daughter. 27 He responded, "The children have to be fed first. It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

28 But she answered, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

29 "Good answer!" he said. "Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter." 30 When she returned to her house, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

31 After leaving the region of Tyre, Jesus went through Sidon toward the Galilee Sea through the region of the Ten Cities. 32 Some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly speak, and they begged him to place his hand on the man for healing. 33 Jesus took him away from the crowd by himself and put his fingers in the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. 34 Looking into heaven, Jesus sighed deeply and said, "*Ephphatha*," which means, "Open up." 35 At once, his ears opened, his twisted tongue was released, and he began to speak clearly.

36 Jesus gave the people strict orders not to tell anyone. But the more he tried to silence them, the more eagerly they shared the news. 37 People were overcome with wonder, saying, "He does everything well! He even makes the deaf to hear and gives speech to those who can't speak."

