

# Love evolving

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Year B, Proper 18

September 9, 2018

Mark 7:24-37

In the beginning of today's Gospel story we are presented with a sick child, a mom at wits end, and Jesus acting rather cruel. This story isn't like any other we hear from the Gospels. It is startling and upsetting.

So let's dive right in.

I bet at first many of you can relate to these circumstance quite well.

I am sure many of you can imagine - or have had the experience of - wanting to do anything - anything (!) - to help your sick and hurting child/parent/friend/colleague - feel better, get better, and return to wholeness, vibrancy and life.

I am sure many of you can imagine yourself - or at least someone you know - acting just like the mom in today's story - doing anything - including breaking every cultural norm, stupid rule, artificial boundary - to secure healing for the love of her life.

I am sure you can imagine this scenario.

Just as I am sure that you cannot imagine Jesus responding the way he did.

The woman finds out Jesus is near and goes to see him, she walks into a stranger's house, bows before Jesus and begs him to help her daughter.

He replies curtly, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Jesus refers to a woman seeking his help as a dog.

This is one of the most troubling encounters in the New Testament and there isn't any way around it. Even if it is the first Sunday back from vacation and everyone is looking for a feel good story.

Today we have to linger with the unsettling.

Up to this point in the story, Jesus understood his mission to be to the Jewish people – his people. This woman was not one of his own. This woman, a Gentile, a Greek of Syrophenician origin, was outside the scope of his mission as he understood it.

Yes, he was geographically in Gentile territory. But that didn't mean he was interested in ministering among Gentiles. Or at least didn't yet know that was what he was to do.

What he knew was that the Gentiles were landowners. They were exploiting the Jewish population. His Jewish brothers and sisters were suffering at their hands.

So, who did this woman think she was? Did she think just because she was a Gentile she had the right to just waltz into this Jewish home and request his help? Jesus was insulted.

You see Jesus wasn't in the right, but Jesus couldn't see past the boundaries set up by his culture. The boundaries set up by society. Some people were in and some people were out. Whether you were in or out depended on perspective.

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," Jesus said.

Or put another way: "What I have to give, I have to give to the Jewish people, the children of God. I cannot take away that which was promised to them by God. I cannot just throw away that which was covenanted to them. I can't give what my father gave me to just anyone. What I have to give is precious."

But the woman – meeting his eyes - answers him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

In these eleven words, this distraught woman both recognizes and challenges his authority. She acts according to her place in society and at the same time challenges that cultural construct.

She is still kneeling. She is begging. She is addressing Jesus as she would someone with authority.

Yet, she is not speaking as a weak whimpering dog that has just been kicked.

With a penetrating gaze, she faces Jesus and says to him that there are others out there hungry for what he has to offer. So hungry that they would scavenge for mere leftovers.

The woman and Jesus were at Match Point.

The insult flies through the air, lands just before the woman's feet, bounces up and is sent flying back toward Jesus with a force strong enough to transform the exchange, indeed strong enough to influence God and God's mission to the world.

It is as if the woman says:

"I see your insult and I will raise you some insight.

I will show you that which you have yet to see.

I will open your eyes to a newer and better understanding of the scope of your power and the scope of your mission.

A scope that covers me and my daughter... and a scope that goes even farther – beyond us, our peoples, and our imaginations."

In this story, everyone agrees, the Syrophoenician woman wins the verbal sparring match.

And in a beautiful turn of events, Jesus, with the same surety with which he insulted the woman, accepts her challenge.

"For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter."

The mom,  
ready to do anything to bring her daughter back to wholeness,  
ready to break every conceivable social barrier,  
ready to be inappropriate and unreasonable,  
ready to do ANYTHING for her daughter,  
shows Jesus that his ministry is to her daughter as much as it is to the Jewish daughters of Jerusalem and that the scope of his ministry is to be opened - to reach the daughters of China, Sudan, El Salvador, and America.

The entire Mission of Jesus Christ, the eternal word made flesh, turns on the words of a mom in distress. Let that sink in.

The entire Mission of Jesus Christ, the eternal word made flesh, turns on the words of a mom in distress (!)

Thank God she was not kept from this mission because of manners or appearances.

Thank God for all the people in our world today who are not afraid to challenge social constructs or cultural norms.

Thank God for all the people who risk their reputations to be at times politically incorrect or unpopular, to risk their security - in order to break down barriers or to share their access to the powers-that-be with others.

Thank God for all these people and thank God for the opportunities we are given to do the same!

How much easier it is for us than it was for the mom - to bring people into the healing presence of Jesus Christ.

For many of us, the only barriers that exist now are the ones we create.

And though they seem benign, they are often the hardest barriers to overcome.

For instance, how often does the desire to be appropriate and reasonable keep us from enacting the faith we express? How often are we frozen by our ego? Or by our supposed manners? Or by norms which only have meaning and power because we allow them to have meaning and power?

We are God's people, we belong to God in and through our relationship with Jesus Christ. We are Christ's people and we are Christ's beating heart and helping hands - in our world - a world in dire need of healing - personal, national, global, cosmic healing.

We are God's people - sometimes in need of healing and sometimes called to heal. And there are opportunities for all of us - to heal or seek healing - beginning with our liturgy today and the healing prayers we offer after communion.

As we start out on a new year in the church (we like to call this the program year), or start out a new school year, or a new job, or season in life -

how can this be a season in which we look to who we are and how we understand our God and God's mission - our needs, our faith, our work...?

how can this be a season in which we can feel free to do everything and anything - including being a little reckless - or inappropriate - or \*gasp\* rude ... for the sake of love and healing?

how can today be a start to a season in which we join God in Jesus Christ in his ever expanding and evolving mission of love?

My friends - hold these questions close and be ready for the ride of your lives.

Amen.