

Story and Meditation: Opened

September 5, 2021

James 2:1-17

Mark 7:24-37

by Eric Anderson

The albatross felt rather sorry for the other creatures on South Georgia Island. They all seemed... sadly limited.

South Georgia Island in the South Atlantic Ocean is a long way from Hawai'i, almost 8,500 miles as the albatross flies, and this was a young albatross and hadn't flown that far yet. Although she certainly would fly that far, the Wandering Albatross of the South Atlantic doesn't like the warm weather that much and doesn't fly as far as the Equator let alone as far as our islands. Ah, well.

Unaware of this sad lack in her life, the young albatross, as I said, thought the other creatures of South Georgia just didn't have the life potential she did as an albatross. Look at the elephant seals, for instance. They were great swimmers, she had to admit, but she could swim on the surface and even dive to catch a squid. On land, they were pretty ungainly and awkward and with her webbed feet she could outrun them.

The penguins, like the seals, swam really well. She had to admit that. Their webbed feet could propel them over the ground almost as fast as her feet could. Their wings, though. Oh, their wings! Great for swimming, but could they fly? No.

The petrels and the pipits? Don't make me laugh. Unlike the seals and the penguins, they weren't limited to the ground, but did they have the great wingspan of a Wandering Albatross, the greatest wingspan in the world? They did not. Could they soar on the winds and hardly come ashore? They could not. No.

Clearly it was a special thing to be an albatross, and a rather sad thing to be, well, just about anything else.

It was an auntie who overheard her feeling sorry aloud for these other creatures one day and said, "Child, come with me."

The two of them flew to a bay on the northeast side of South Georgia Island, one she hadn't paid attention to before. On the shoreline were some peculiar shapes, regular and rectangular, that didn't look anything like the craggy mountains or shoreline. As they circled overhead, a peculiar creature emerged from one of the boxy things and walked quickly along between them. It strode on upright on two legs, like a penguin, but it was much taller than any penguin

she'd ever seen, even if much smaller than an emperor seal. It clearly had no wings, and she was amazed to watch it stop, bend, and pick up something on the ground with its upper limbs.

Shortly afterward, it broke into a run, and she realized that she'd never compete with this creature in a race.

"Still feeling sorry for all the other creatures?" asked her auntie. "These things can do things we can't."

"They can't fly, can they?" challenged her niece.

Auntie replied, "No, they can't. But:

"Is a fish of no worth because it cannot walk?
Is a seal of no worth because it cannot fly?
Is a bird of no worth because it cannot run?
Is a life of no worth because it is not like yours?"

These two stories in Mark 7 are not my favorite moments with Jesus. The encounter with the Syrophenician woman is marked with simple cruelty. Lots of commentators have twisted a lot of words and a lot of logic to make "throw it to the dogs" sound less harsh, and I think they've failed. As Cheryl Lindsay writes at ucc.org, "Those words Jesus utters make me cringe because they are dehumanizing. Her response, which Jesus honors, asserts her worth. She comes to Jesus looking for a miracle for her child. She leaves having received that and more—affirmation of her identity and the assertion of her worth."

Nearly unique among the gospel writers, Mark was not afraid to depict a Jesus who could learn. Nearly unique among the gospel writers, Mark was not afraid to learn from a Jesus who learned. If Jesus could learn from a Gentile woman, and Mark could learn from a Jesus who learned from a Gentile woman, I guess I can learn from a Jesus who could learn from a Gentile woman, too.

I also have problems with the second story in this passage, the healing of the deaf man. There is something missing here. A group of people brought a deaf man to Jesus. Jesus took the man aside, put his fingers in the man's ears, touched his tongue, and spoke the word, "Ephphatha," the Aramaic word for "Open up." The man heard and spoke clearly, the people were amazed, Jesus told them not to tell anybody, and they ignored him and told everybody anyway.

Did you catch what was missing?

Did Jesus find out from the man himself what he wanted?

We can, if we like, insert that "between the lines," to conclude that Jesus and the man agreed on what was about to happen as they moved away from the crowd, or that the man's friends

had already received his permission. We can do that, but it's not clear in the text that Jesus or anybody else did that, and that's not an unusual experience for people with disabilities.

One of my favorite movies is *Amelie*, a French film from 2001. In one amazing scene, the title character, suddenly convinced that her mission in life is to do good things for people, seizes the arm of a blind man waiting to cross the street and walks him briskly along the sidewalk. As they go, she delivers a rapid description of the people and creatures and shops they go by. As the scene ends, she delivers the man to a Metro station and, as the camera twirls above him, the blind man looks heavenward in wonder. It's a beautiful scene.

It's also completely wrong. *Amelie* never asked his permission, never asked him where he was going, never entered into an actual conversation with him. She treated him like a child, or even more, like a pet, a pet for whom she had affection, but... do we really want people to treat people like dogs?

I confess that sometimes I wish people would treat people as well as they treat dogs, but that's when I'm getting really cynical.

One thing you can say with some assurance: in healing this deaf man, Jesus restored him to full participation in his community. Community relies on communication – we even use three of the same syllables in those two words. In the first century, there probably weren't other options for this man and his friends. The same is true of the Syrophenician woman's daughter. Her condition, one not really described, separated her and her family from their neighbors. The barrier to overcome, however, was the religious, cultural, and ethnic gap between Gentiles and Jews. "We can be part of the same community," she told Jesus, and Jesus, though resistant, agreed.

We can also fully include people with disabilities into our community. At minimum, we need to recognize that the structures of our society, physical and social, the structures we created, put people with disabilities at a disadvantage.

When I was in seminary, I visited the nearby town of Watertown, Massachusetts. For the life of me I can't remember why. The city is home to the Perkins School for the Blind, founded in 1829. Watertown's crossing signals had a peculiar feature. They made noise, ringing a bell when pedestrians had the right of way to cross the street. It was the first place I'd ever heard such a thing.

Think for a moment about this. People had created roads and cars. With increasing vehicles on the streets, people created traffic signals, and then special signals for people on foot. These special signals relied entirely upon visual cues – and they didn't have to. They demonstrated that decades ago in Watertown, Massachusetts. It took the 1990 federal law called the Americans with Disabilities Act to begin – to begin – the process of bringing that feature to crosswalks elsewhere.

Curb cuts, those ramps at corners, had to be mandated by law. Sign interpretation for major events and Braille transcription for students had to be mandated by law. Employers resisted making accommodation for disabled employees to do their jobs until it was mandated by law.

And I remind you that in each instance, it was not the limitations of the disability that had to be overcome, it was the structures in place that assumed some common set of abilities that had created obstacles and those obstacles had to be overcome.

One curious piece of history: the Rev. Harold H. Wilke, a UCC minister, was present at the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Famously, when President George H. W. Bush turned to Rev. Wilke to give him a souvenir pen, Rev. Wilke slipped his foot from his shoe and took the pen in his toes, because he was born without arms.

The great news is that we don't need to perform miracles to fully include people in our community. We need to remove the barriers that obstruct their participation. We need to value their participation. We need to assume that they have contributions. We need to understand that they are defined by their humanity, not their disability.

As Rachel Held Evans wrote, "The apostles remembered what many modern Christians tend to forget—that what makes the gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out but who it lets in."

Is a fish of no worth because it cannot walk?

Is a seal of no worth because it cannot fly?

Is a bird of no worth because it cannot run?

Is a life of no worth because it is not like yours?

Amen.