

Open to Mercy

September 8, 2024

James 2:1-17

Mark 7:24-37

“[Jesus] said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.’”

So much for “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.”

A lot of theologians and Biblical scholars over the years have done interpretive backflips – which is like interpretive dance, I suppose, except it doesn't look as good – to make Jesus sound... appropriate... in this verse. As Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org, “What do we do when Jesus seems to be as bad as everyone else... when the words he speaks cause us great discomfort and seem to be at odds with the God that we know and love? The passage in Mark is not the first time that someone—or even an entire group of people—gets othered by the one we expect to do and be better. But, this is Jesus doing that work, and his language seems particularly harsh. Readers and listeners surely ask the question, ‘Did Jesus just call that woman and her child and the people in their community... dogs?’ Even after reading, studying, and even preaching this passage, I am still asking. It's that jarring.”

I don't think we can give Jesus an excuse here. I think we have to deal with it just the way that the woman dealt with it two millennia ago. We have to hear it, swallow it, challenge it, and see if that makes a difference.

This Syrophenician woman's challenge made all the difference in the world.

Jesus wasn't looking to heal anybody that day. He had come to Tyre, which is in present-day Lebanon. In the first century, it was outside the regions of Judea and Galilee, where Jews were in the majority. In Tyre, Jesus was a foreigner and an outsider. From what Mark says, that he was trying to avoid notice, that was deliberate. It looks, in fact, like another of Jesus' always-frustrated attempts in the Gospel of Mark to get some time off.

When you're on vacation in Las Vegas, do you really want to be doing your Hilo job?

Somehow – we don't know how – she'd heard about him. Somehow – we don't know how – she spotted him. She brought all her need and all her fear and all her love for her daughter and laid it at Jesus' feet. She “begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.”

Jesus said, offensively, “No.”

She was the supplicant in that moment, and she was a woman confronting a man in a deeply sexist culture. He, on the other hand, was an outsider who couldn't count on support from the people who were, after all, neighbors to this woman. This story doesn't fit neatly into our categories of power and authority. Jesus' statement about children and dogs makes it sound like he believed he was "in charge" in that moment. On foreign soil, however, that was something of an illusion, and she knew it. Her response, which has often been described as a moment of humble petition, sounds different to me.

I think she landed a blow right on Jesus' hubris. I think she cast a dart that punctured Jesus' pride.

It's funny how people think better and more compassionately when their self-importance gets set aside.

They become open to mercy, to acting mercifully, to letting mercy triumph over judgment.

That's how this story becomes about us even more than it is about Jesus.

It's election season – well, campaign season. One of the things that frustrates me about campaign season is the way that so many candidates set out to prove that their opponent is a jerk, and how successfully they do it. The problem is, when someone sets out to prove that someone else is a jerk, they usually do so in ways that reveal that they, too, are jerks. When I need to choose between one demonstrated jerk and another demonstrated jerk, I make that choice without enthusiasm.

There's another characteristic of much of American politics, though, that's more frustrating than proof of jerkiness. It's the insistence that a candidate's proposals and policies have remained fixed and constant. No "wishy-washy" modification of position. No change. No growth.

No... learning.

Seriously? I'm supposed to be impressed that a person running for public office has never learned anything?

Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "The 'Good News' is not that we serve a shiny, inaccessible deity who floats five feet above the ground. It is that Jesus shows us — in real time, in the flesh — what it means to grow as a child of God. He embodies what it looks like to stretch into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God's love."

Last week we looked at the stories just before this in Mark's Gospel. In that sermon, I said, "Most of all, he [Jesus] would not mistake the trivial for the vital. He would not mistake the somewhat important for the greatly important." It's somewhat embarrassing to have said that,

because Jesus mistook the trivial for the important just five verses later. It's more embarrassing to have made the same mistake myself. Yesterday.

Yesterday I was attending an anti-racism training session. It's something I've done before. So I shouldn't have done what I did. I got focused for some time on some errors in history, which were, in the end, trivial. It took some time to realize what I'd done. When I did, I was embarrassed and ashamed. And I had some difficulties falling asleep last night.

I wonder if that's how Jesus felt.

Maren Tirabassi writes at her blog, [GiftsInOpenHands](#):

Jesus thought he was willing
to enter every aspect
of human life and death.

Scorn, betrayal, suffering?
Bring them on,
but probably he never
imagined shame.

Being human is to feel shame.

I don't know for certain how Jesus felt. I know how I've felt – not just once but many times. Yes, being human is to feel shame. Which is a shame in itself.

But will we grow from it?

Courtney V. Buggs writes at [Working Preacher](#), "The use of 'dogs' to refer to this woman (and her community) recalls the derogatory terms used to describe Black women in modern society. Vice President Kamala Harris, former First Lady Michelle Obama, tennis extraordinaire Serena Williams, and Presidential advisor Valerie Jarrett are but a few women who have been publicly maligned with harmful language."

Will we grow from that?

Will we open ourselves to mercy? To giving mercy, but also to receiving it for our errors and sins?

Will we learn?

It's a funny thing about the second healing in this morning's reading from Mark. Jesus had left Tyre and returned to the region near Galilee, but this time to the eastern side, in modern

Jordan. Like Tyre, the area was inhabited mostly by Gentiles. And as in Tyre, people came up to him asking him to heal someone who almost certainly was a foreigner to Jesus.

This time, Jesus offered no protest. He did things that, frankly, we really only tolerate from medical personnel. He put his fingers in the man's ears, and touched his tongue. I mean, yuck.

He'd also touched a Gentile. That would have been frowned upon, certainly. But he chose the important over the trivial.

Jesus acted with mercy.

Barbara Messner writes at her blog, BarbPoetPriest,

Yet Jesus showed the way of self-searching
that faces the shame
of rash judgement, acknowledges true words
heard and respected.
Brave challenge cast out demons of dishonour,
healing healer and child.

There are so many demons of dishonor among us whose cries drown out the summons to mercy. Racism, sexism, heterosexism, elitism, greed, power, self-righteousness, the temptations of the trivial. These things and others would have us believe that there are good reasons to withhold mercy. Mostly, those reasons don't hold up. Mostly, those reasons will end up shaming us, perhaps in private, perhaps in public.

If we turn away from those things, however, if we let the shame wash over us, if we acknowledge the guilt, if we perceive another way, if we choose another path, then we open ourselves to mercy and open ourselves to sharing mercy. As Jesus opened himself to mercy.

So he "cast out demons of dishonor, healing healer and child."

Amen.

by Eric Anderson