

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, March 1, 2009

Face to Face: Slander and Gentleness ***“Eating Crumbs”***

Mark 7:24-30

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Gentiles were not supposed to talk with Jews. Jews were not to associate with non-Jewish persons. Jews were not to intermarry. They were the chosen people, destined to be a blessing to all people. And yet, on the whole, the Jews missed the point of their exclusive promise. And they definitely missed the point of Jesus. A face to face encounter with God was missed.

But even Jesus, in our text, lived up to the Jews misunderstanding. A non-Jewish woman, a woman from Syrian Phoenicia, came to Jesus because her daughter was demon-possessed. The woman knew that Jesus could make her daughter free. She understood her place and her unwelcomed status within Judaism. Jesus told her to wait until the children were fed and even referred to the woman as a dog; a demeaning comment by the savior.

Slander is a type of defamation. Slander is an untruthful spoken statement about a person that harms the person's reputation or standing in the community. Whereas slander is becoming more commonplace and left frequently unchallenged, gentleness as an approach to handling life's challenges is on the decline. Gentleness is a forgotten virtue.

Life is extremely busy for most of us. Productivity is the bottom line. Stress, financial concerns, work output and “making things happen” push us to “cut through the fat” and to “get the work out.” Being rude, untactful, “brutally honest” and harsh become virtues that need no apology if they help to get done what needs to be done. Courtesy, affability and tenderness are shoved aside for traits that get more immediate results.

This morning's passage launches us squarely into a theological conundrum. Is Jesus divine or human? Of course, the correct answer, arrived at in the early debates and Councils of the Church is that he is both. But, could Jesus, in his humanity, although he never sinned, could he have had faults and limitations just like you and me?

Jesus couldn't go anywhere without being recognized. He was tired, worn out and needed some time away. The story tells us that Jesus left his hometown area and traveled to Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Jesus needed some time away; some down time. I suppose many of you can sympathize with Jesus.

Jesus entered the house hoping to go unrecognized, but he could not escape notice. No sooner had he sat down, a distraught woman bowed at his feet and pleaded for his help for her ailing daughter. The woman heard about his presence and came to ask for help. She had a daughter who was possessed by an evil spirit. The woman fell at Jesus' feet, which showed great respect and humility. The text stresses the non- Jewish character of the woman. She was a Hellenist in the Phoenician republic of Tyre, which was administered by Syria. She was not a Hebrew. The very human Jesus did not jump to tireless attention and happily heal the woman's daughter. The very human Jesus was, in fact, irritated. The woman was a Syrophoenician, a Gentile and from another country. The woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter and Jesus responded, "First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." What Jesus was saying is this: "I heal my people. I don't waste it on foreigners, on Gentiles, on dogs."

Is that an accurate translation of what Jesus said? Yes. What he meant is this: The children are the nation of Israel, known as the children of God. Jesus has come for the children of God that is the nation of Israel. Jesus told the woman that his mission was to Israel first. We see this reinforced by Paul in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

The way Jesus phrased his response to the woman, he placed an enigmatic statement before her to test her faith, which the woman clearly understood. The puzzle He threw at her revolved around the word "dogs". The woman replied, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus was impressed. The faith of this Gentile woman contrasted dramatically with the determined unbelief of the Pharisees and the scribes in Jerusalem with whom Jesus had recently dealt. Her witty reply indicated a degree of understanding that even the disciples did not seem to be able to obtain. Jesus stated that it was inappropriate to interrupt the meal to feed the

dogs and even more to take the food meant for the children and give it to the pets. The people of Israel were to be fed first.

The woman's witty reply pointed out that the house dogs were in fact fed at the same time as the children. Jesus healed her daughter. Jesus referred to this Gentile woman as a dog. That is hard to hear. We were not the first choice to receive the Gospel. We who are not Jewish are second. Jesus came for all people, but he came first for the people of Israel. Jesus' primary mission in his earthly ministry was to the Hebrews.

As far as I can see, this is a Jesus with human foibles and limitations; tiredness, irritation and prejudice. Not a very pretty picture. Isn't it clear that a very human Jesus was tired and irritated, that he lost his temper and fell victim to the prejudices of his day? We may not think it a pretty picture, but it is the honest one.

In Jesus' day, as in ours, I am afraid there was much national and religious prejudice. The feeding of the Syrophenician woman is a third feeding story sandwiched in between the feeding of thousands. It was one thing when Jesus fed the five thousand near his hometown, where everyone was from the homeland and where everyone had the right religion. There was abundance galore for God's chosen people. It is another thing to feed "a dog" the Gentile Syrophenician woman; and yet another thing when Jesus fed the four thousand in Gennesaret. For there he was saying that God's abundance, the Good News of the Gospel extended to the Gentiles, to the foreigners, not just one. Jesus was saying that God's love encompassed all people and all lands and he was the savior. Reconciliation with the Father was through him. The Gospel does not discriminate against anyone; its abundance is poured out on all.

This morning's passage, Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, fits squarely between the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand. It fits between the place where Jesus taught that God's abundance was poured out on those of his homeland and the place where he taught that God's abundance is poured out on all. That brings us back to the consideration of Jesus' divine and human nature. Jesus came to Gennesaret looking for a vacation. Like most of us, when Jesus was tired and overwhelmed, we see something of his less than perfect self. Jesus was trying to get away from it all, but he couldn't. Wherever he went, even to the foreign land of Gennesaret, people recognized him and were drawn to his healing powers. Jesus wanted to rest, but the Syrophenician woman appeared and begged him to help her daughter. What came out of Jesus' mouth was jarring. He said, "I heal my people. I don't waste my powers on foreigners, on Gentiles, on dogs." At his worst self, Jesus sounded like any biased Jew of his day.

Indeed, if the story ended there, our Christian faith would be far poorer. William Loader writes: "There are many 'dogs' in our community who know what it is like to be shut out, told to wait and given second best. Calling them cute puppies or 'the blessed poor' does not address the issue, as long as they are treated like dogs. They have been treated as dogs so much so that it had become natural to treat them that way and to ignore their plight and our often naive prejudice." Yes, if the story ended here, our Christian faith would be sorely lacking. Thankfully, the Syrophenician woman was not easily intimidated. Thankfully Jesus couldn't so easily dismiss her. For the moment she was willing to play the part of the dog to press the situation and get her daughter healed. She said, "But even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Finally, Jesus was shaken from his tired and biased stupor. He came to his senses. Jesus healed the woman's daughter. Jesus knew that the Good News was for everyone. We see that understanding enacted not only in the healing of the woman's daughter, but in the feeding of the four thousand that follows it; this time the feeding of a foreigner and then the feeding of those who did not share either Jesus' nationality or his religion. This morning's story sheds profound light on Jesus' divine and human natures. His human side was flawed. Jesus could be tired, irritable and misguided, much like the rest of us.

Jesus' divine side is found in his capacity to live a Gospel of love and inclusion, a Gospel that we are still learning to understand and live out. In this Jesus, I see hope for us, not only for our being loved even if some would see us as dogs, but also for our being loving. Genesis states that we ourselves are formed in God's image. That means we share much of Jesus' nature. I suppose few of us have any trouble believing that we share the tired, short-tempered and biased nature of Jesus. But the more hopeful part of our nature may be that we can change. We can be shaken awake into a new day and made into a new person. We can learn to see and live the Gospel of compassion unfettered by our basest instincts. We can bear more and more evidence of that divine image in which we are created. That is the beauty of regeneration, conversion and sanctification. We will be the best Jesus someone sees.

Pascal writes, "God made man in his own image and man returned the compliment."¹ We have shaped Jesus over the centuries into a dreadfully small deity. We want a Jesus who confirms our prejudices and preferences. "In every age and culture, we tend to shape Jesus to our image and make him over to our own needs in order to cope with the stress his unedited presence creates."² Religious belief has but two choices in this matter: to be a bigoted

¹As cited in *Abba's Child* by Brennan Manning (Colorado springs: NAVPRESS, 1994), 15.

²Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1992), 131.

people proclaiming a bigoted God, a God constructed in the image of the most unappealing aspects of our being; or to be a benevolent people striving to live out that true and divine image with which God stamped us in creation. How much better it is to be the latter; surprised and delighted by the abundance even of a few crumbs.

If only we were aware that we are hungry. We need Jesus. How has slander blinded us and kept us rooted in our prejudices? Let us rid ourselves of slander and put on gentleness. Face to face with Jesus. Come closer. Be changed. Let us pray!

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