

Pentecost 16B (9/9/2018)

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Psalm 146

James 2:1-10 [11-13] 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

God is not unapproachable and unbending. We can't treat God like a divine butler, forever at our beck and call, but we can bear witness to a God who hears the cries of faithful people and responds. So, we can implore God to make good on the promise by which we have come to know God, that is, the promise of mercy and justice, especially for the least among us.

There's really no easy way around the scandal at the heart of our Gospel from Mark today. Jesus, it seems, is not at his best, and he doesn't live up to the model of mercy we've come to expect. In response to the Syrophenician woman's plea for healing on behalf of her daughter, he doesn't demonstrate his characteristic compassion, but instead disparages her: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the [little] dogs." Jesus is a Jew and the Syrophenician woman a Gentile, and his rebuke echoes a historical conflict between Jewish and Gentile communities. Furthermore, from a theological perspective, Jesus' messianic mission has heretofore unfolded exclusively within the context of Judaism; non-Jewish peoples simply have not entered into the scope of his concern.

Still, what are we to make of this apparent lapse in his goodness? Embarrassed interpreters have bent over backwards to excuse or at least soften Jesus' insult. Some have argued that his response to the Syrophenician woman is not authentic to the original text, but was added later by an editor

with an agenda. Others have insisted that Jesus' phrase was a well-known proverb, and so would not have been as offensive in its original context.¹ Still others have suggested that the term "little dogs" is, in fact, endearing – that Jesus is referring to Gentiles as "puppies," or adorable animal companions.²

But these explanations are strained efforts to distract from the uncomfortable fact that, in this instance, Jesus appears to be caught with his compassion down.³ Maybe he's tired, and maybe he's annoyed at being accosted by yet another person desperate for healing, but the abruptness of his response is meant to unsettle us. **The Gospel writer of Mark, however, is less concerned with preserving Jesus' perfect image than he is with telling a compelling story of conversion.**

Of course, Jesus' insult is not the end of the story. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he says, to which the woman quickly replies: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." *Even Gentiles fall within God's purview, she insists, even Gentiles are included in the Master's feast.* The Syrophenician woman humbly and brilliantly reframes Jesus' metaphor, matching his rhetorical prowess, and thus she persuades him to grant her request to heal her daughter. **Jesus is our best Teacher, yet he allows an unnamed stranger to teach him about the wideness of God's mercy.** Like a prophet, she calls him out of his narrow self-

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 47.

² Pheme Perkins, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 610.

³ Amy C. Howe, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 44.

understanding and into his identity as the Savior of the whole world. **The Syrophoenician woman's boldness changes his mind, reorienting his purpose and expanding his mission field. Jesus is converted. And immediately, he opens the ears of someone else. "Ephphatha," he says, that is, *be opened to the good news of God's merciful reign breaking into your midst, even as I have been opened.***

It's refreshing that Jesus doesn't have to be right all the time. His willingness to hear the truth from the Syrophoenician woman is a mark of humility and grace. And his change of heart does not diminish his authority, but reinforces it.⁴ **Jesus' conversion reveals that God is not unapproachable and unbending. We can't treat God like a divine butler, forever at our beck and call, but we can bear witness to a God who hears the cries of faithful people and responds.** Think of the intercessory prayer of the prophet Moses, pleading with God to turn from the plan to destroy the Israelites for their unfaithfulness.⁵ **God changes God's mind. Always for the sake of mercy, God changes God's mind. So, like Moses, like the Syrophoenician woman, we can implore God to make good on the promise by which we have come to know God, that is, the promise of mercy and justice, especially for the least among us.**

⁴ See Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 49.

⁵ Exodus 32:11-14.

Of course, the fulfillment of that promise implicates us. **How willing are we to open our ears to a truth we have been unwilling or unable to hear? How ready are we to change our minds for the sake of mercy?**

A colleague of mine recently told the story of a man from the street who defied his expectations. It's a common occurrence – a nameless person, unkempt and sometimes unsteady, approaches you in a public place with a request for help. *Don't give him anything*, we've trained ourselves, *don't acknowledge him*. You certainly wouldn't want to be conned into supporting his habit, right? Yet, on this occasion, someone gave the man something. And, as my colleague happened to follow him into a public restroom, he was surprised and humbled to overhear the man praying out loud for the person who had just provided for his next meal. *Even the dogs eat the children's crumbs; even the person from the street is included in the Master's feast.*

Dear church, our task as people of faith is not to be right all the time, but to be open to conversion. **Our prejudices, our assumptions restrict God's intent to restore people to health, to relationship, to fullness of life. But, the living Christ opens our ears to hear and releases our tongues to tell of the wideness of God's mercy. So, let's be astounded again at God's resolve to make life out of death, and let's proclaim even more boldly that there is a place for everyone at the Master's feast.**