

If Jesus Did....

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

When you hear our reading today, the Gospel text suggested by today's lectionary, you may respond to some of Jesus' words by thinking, He did not just say that! Indeed, Jesus' words to the woman he encounters in this passage are a shock. You might expect me to say, just wait, I'm going to explain why he didn't mean it. But I'm not. I invite you to be uncomfortable.

Even so, there is good news by the end of the passage, and there's good news for us who follow Jesus's Way, even so.

Mark 7:24-37

7:24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,

7:25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

7:26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

7:27 He 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."

7:28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

7:29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter."

7:30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Prayer

Sermon

Last week I pointed out that the passage about hand washing came close on the heels of the feeding of the 5000. In Mark, the ordering of stories matters a lot. Mark builds their points story by story. So where does today's story come? There's the feeding of the 5,000 - mostly Jewish peasants - the dialogue on handwashing from last week - and now two stories of Jesus ministering with outsiders - followed by the feeding of 4,000 mostly Gentile peasants. In short

this section of Mark is where Jesus' ministry moves from an insider movement to one with universal implications. And it happens because this woman teaches Jesus. This woman provokes a radical change in Jesus' perspective.

This passage centers on someone Jesus should not have interacted with, if he was following the rules. A woman, a Gentile, the mother of one possessed. She is the ultimate Other. And until this moment in Mark, Jesus' ministry has been within his community. Her provocation calls Jesus out, and after their conversation, his saving ministry becomes one for everyone.

But first, Jesus has to be willing to change.

Here is the good news: anyone who has been Othered, anyone who has ever been told they are not good enough, that they are not worthy of God's love, we have a model in this woman who would not accept that she and her daughter were other or less than.

Here is the good news: we have a Teacher and Savior who could change when he had to, who could practice *teshuvah*, Hebrew for return, a concept of repentance and change. So often we hold on to Jesus being perfect. We emulate a perfect teacher. But there is something important about following a teacher who is able to change. Jesus was human, and it takes great spiritual humility and strength to be willing to change. This is one of the parts of Jesus' humanity that is the most important for us to emulate. As this story opens, Jesus has a bias called out and is willing to move toward justice and inclusion rather than doubling down on ministering to only his own community.

I thought about titling this sermon, if Jesus can, we can. But that's not quite the point. It's really, If Jesus did, we should. Jesus examined his own biases - and let's say it directly - there was sexism, racism and religious bias in his words "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." And Jesus changed, became more inclusive, welcoming, compassionate, just.

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Twenty years ago this week, I was a second year divinity student. That clear blue morning classmates, faculty and staff stood around tv screens weeping. We called family, we tried to donate blood, we recognized within moments that our world had changed. But it is the weeks that followed that I remembered as I was working on this sermon. It happened quickly: in the midst of a terrible, shared trauma, there came reports on the religion of the terrorists. Soon our Muslim neighbors were all thought to be culpable. The Othering was swift and brutal. And our Sikh neighbors were lumped into the same reports and they too were harmed. But I experienced something different at HDS. I had my first real interfaith conversations. I remember a prayer vigil led by Muslim students, when Muslim, Jewish and Christian students knelt in prayer together. We came to understand that we could not Other one another.

I have heard stories from Pilgrim Church from that era and I know this congregation, and your pastor then, were at work building interfaith friendships in that time.

Here we are in 2021, and I do not think we are done with bias and prejudice. I do not think we are done as a society and I do not think we are done individually. Well, maybe I'm projecting here, and all y'all are perfectly loving, perfectly compassionate, perfectly inclusive, perfectly just. So I'll just preach to myself for a second.

I know I've got work to do. I know there are changes I need to make to be not just less racially biased but actively anti-racist; I know I misgendered one of my trans siblings this week; I know I focus in on myself and my community too much. But I also know that I follow a teacher who could learn, a leader who could be humble, a savior who could change. So, following Jesus, I keep working on change.

And let's think of this story from the perspective of this unnamed mother, who would not be marginalized. The Out in Scripture commentary on this passage from the Human Rights Campaign reminds us to think of who might be Othered today like the Syrophoenician woman. Wayne Reed writes, "Our experience on the fringes of society gives the LGBT community a way of seeing alienation throughout our society. Like the Syrophoenician woman, we fight for recognition and acceptance. As we find our place, it becomes our task to remain focused on those who remain in the margins from whence we've come."¹

By the end of the story, Jesus called this woman and her daughter out from under the table, so that they could partake of the bread of life, the healing only Jesus could offer, the love of God. He gave them a seat at the table. And today, as we receive Communion, we are reminded that at Jesus' table, everyone is invited. No one is other, no one has to take the crumbs or the leftovers, everyone has a seat at the welcome table. May it be so everywhere, for everyone. Amen.

¹ https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/assets/resources/OutinScripture_Ordinary_YearB.pdf?mtime=20200713142142&focal=none