

Lec 23B-Sept. 8, 2024

Psalm 146

Isaiah 35:4-7a, James 2:1-10, 14-17, Mark 7:24-37

St. Paul Newark -Barbara Melosh

Today's gospel includes a story of one of Jesus' healing miracles, but it is a story that stands on its own, unlike any other. It turns on a startling exchange between Jesus and a desperate mother. When she pleads for help, Jesus at first refuses—and on top of it, he insults her, in words that are among the harshest he ever speaks.

A former pastor of mine used to imagine a sermon series titled "Things I Wish Jesus Had Never Said." Today's story would certainly be on the top of my list for that series.

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This story is startling in another way too. It exposes Jesus in his full humanity—and in an aspect of our humanity that is not one we want to admit or embrace. Jesus appears cold and rejecting in this story, unable to practice the inclusive love of God in this moment.

And as the story develops, the writer of Mark proposes something even more startling. Jesus' encounters with others proved life-changing for many people he met. But in this story, Jesus himself is changed by the woman who comes to him for healing.

This is a story of a desperate mother, pleading for the life of her desperately ill daughter. It's a story of boundaries—of how the circle of care that is wrapped around insiders is also a fence that keeps others out. It's a story about the power of love to cross boundaries. And most of all, it's a story of God's surprising and uncontrollable action, the unbounded power of God's own love.

As the story opens, Jesus himself is crossing boundaries, returning to Gentile territory. The last time he was there, he drove out demons, a whole legion of them, sending the demons into a herd of swine that ran over a cliff. The people who saw this were awed and terrified, and not necessarily wanting to see another display of Jesus' power; they begged Jesus to leave their neighborhood (Mark 5:17). Now, he's back again and doesn't want people to know it.

In Mark, Jesus repeatedly asks people NOT to tell about his miraculous deeds, NOT to reveal his movements. But over and over, he is unable to control the response of people who hear his word and see what he has done; the word spreads like wildfire, in spite of Jesus' efforts to contain it. So it is here in Tyre. The woman who comes to him has heard about him, and comes to beg him for help for her daughter, possessed by a demon.

By doing this, she is crossing boundaries. An outsider and a woman, she is doubly unclean for Jews. And she crosses another boundary as she enters the house where Jesus is trying to escape notice.

Now of course Jesus himself has challenged the boundaries of purity law more than once. In the story we heard just last week, Jesus responded to criticism from the Pharisees about his disciples eating with unwashed hands, in violation of Jewish purity law. Jesus counters them by saying that outward appearances and tradition—observing the purity laws—are less important than what comes from inside. What goes into a person does not defile—but what comes out of us.

But listen to what comes out of Jesus' own mouth.

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

In other words, “I'm here for my own people, the Jews. Someday, maybe, I'll reach out to people like you—but for now? My concern is for my own, not for someone like you—a dog scavenging at my table.”

This insult and rejection is not what we expect to hear from Jesus, but what he is saying is very human—something that we have heard many times and thought and said ourselves. We're especially likely to shut out outsiders or resist pleas for help when we feel like there's not enough to go around—not enough money, not enough food, not enough love. It's one of the themes in our national debate about immigration—we are afraid that the strangers among us will take our children's food.

Our use of money is often like this too. In most congregations, our offerings and pledges go to support our own needs—to pay our bills and take care of

our buildings, to buy supplies and pay for services. Only a small percent of the money we get goes out to our community or our larger church. Crumbs. Or, we love our church and we care about our communities, but in our wills we leave all our money to our children.

Mostly, the people who are left out in our world don't talk back—or they do, and we stop up our ears, and manage not to hear them. But this Gentile woman who comes to Jesus won't be silenced. When Jesus calls her a dog, she comes right back at him— “Sir,” she says, “even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” In other words, “call me a dog, but I'll stay here and beg for crumbs, if that's what it takes to find healing for my daughter.”

That unnamed woman dared to cross the boundaries that separated Jews from Gentiles, men from women, clean from unclean. Driven by desperate need, she refused to stay in her place.

Today she is joined by millions of immigrants and refugees around the world, fleeing chaos and violence in Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Ukraine, S. Sudan, Myanmar—the list goes on. Crossing boundaries, they disrupt and challenge the countries where they seek refuge. Some turn them away. Others have welcomed them, and faced backlash from people threatened by these strangers and overwhelmed by their need. And of course right here in our country, immigration is a hotly contested issue.

In the next story in this gospel, Jesus opens the ears of a deaf man, and frees his tongue. In this one, the woman's daring words open Jesus's own ears—and his heart. He tells her to go home—he has set her daughter free from the demon.

In this story, Jesus himself crosses a boundary. This determined mother has called Jesus into a ministry and mission that reach beyond his own people. Responding to her need, he becomes who he is meant to be.

We follow Jesus whenever we ourselves cross boundaries. When we take the risk of welcoming a stranger. When we listen to one another across the boundaries of race or gender or sexuality or political convictions; when we look for what might connect us even when we are divided.

Whenever we are able to widen the circle of 'we', we ourselves are healed and set free. We get a little glimpse of God's own life, wider and deeper than we can possibly imagine; God's love without limit.

So hear this good news. This day and every day, you are embraced in the circle of God's open arms.