



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: September 6, 2009

Start Spreading the (Good) News, Robert B. Culp

Mark 7:24-37

There are a number of followers in the Christian faith who have found the first part of our lesson this morning more than a little unsettling. Mark's story of the Syrophenician woman, which is also echoed in Matthew's Gospel, portrays Jesus responding to a woman in need in a way that is initially harsh, and then even insulting. Jesus wants no one to know he is on retreat in the region of Tyre, but this desperate woman searches him out and on her knees begs him to heal her daughter. He then equates her people – pagan, non-Jewish souls – with dogs. So, it's understandable why many readers of the Gospel are disturbed and really wish that this particular personal exchange had been left out of the canon.

But I'm glad this story is in our Gospel accounts; and to be honest, I find it somewhat comforting and encouraging. For it shows both the humanity of Jesus, as well as the radical and transforming power of a woman. Indeed, such a tale shows us that Jesus himself had some "bad" days and did not have the perfect clarity of call at every single moment in his life that we would like to attribute to him. Even Jesus, like the rest of rest, was occasionally less than his best.

To provide a little context, Jesus was living through a fairly rough stretch within his ministry, and he found himself exhausted and depleted. Faced with rejection in his own hometown of Nazareth and the gruesome execution of his beloved friend John the Baptist, having to deal with the insistent clamor of the crowds and the testy confrontations of the religious leaders, and struggling with the doubts and confusion of his own closest followers who seemed timid and afraid before the challenges of modeling the kingdom's values in the world ... it is no wonder that Jesus took off and withdrew to the borderland of Tyre. His growing reputation was bringing out both the crowds and the threatened religious establishment, and things were definitely heating up. Jesus was likely looking for some rest and a little peace and quiet.

But he could not escape notice, and a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit approached him, bowed down, and begged him to help her. Rather spent and weary, I suspect Jesus wanted to ignore her ... perhaps wondering whether he could continue to bear all the people's demands, and wishing that all these clamoring, needy people would just go away.

Now, it does not diminish Jesus that he experienced such human emotions. On the contrary, his responses in the face of such feelings reflect his deep compassion and fierce integrity. If he were simply perfection personified, there would be little of ourselves to see in the One who was God-made-flesh ... and little from which we could draw inspiration and encouragement.

Parenthetically, in Matthew's account of this encounter, he describes the disciples as being annoyed when the woman approached Jesus. They could see Jesus did not want to be bothered, for he was tired. But this pesky woman kept coming and knelt before Jesus' feet and started begging. Like Biblical bodyguards, they urged Jesus to send her away. I can picture exhaustion in his eyes as he looked at his friends, and then justified his lack of response by saying to the woman that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It was burden enough to be ministering unto the needs of his own people, the chosen people of God, without having to deal with pagans and Gentiles.

Mark notes that this woman was not Jewish. She was Syrophoenician, an indication of her non-Jewish tradition and her non-Hebrew nationality. She was a foreigner, a pagan, and outside the realm of Jesus' designated mission as he understood it. But she was a woman who would not take no for an answer. She, too, was weary, with hours of constant and vigilant care for a daughter in deep distress. And she bore the frustrating loneliness of being the mother of a child whose disease was seen in her day as the consequence of sin. Her daughter was suffering, and she knew that Jesus had the power to do something about it. So, she stayed on her knees and asked him to help her.

She was desperate. She might have been thinking: "I hear all these great things about you, Jesus. I hear how powerful you are, how compassionate you are, how you make the impossible possible, how you turn night into day, how you bring life out of the grave. If you turn away from me, I am without hope. Please, help me!" But that's when Jesus says the insulting thing about not throwing his saving power to those who were not like his people: "No, I can't help you and your people, who are like dogs."

Now, it's at that point that you kind of figure that this woman's got to break, stop her bothering Jesus, and leave him alone. But she doesn't cave in or give up. Instead, she does to Jesus what Jesus has been doing to the Pharisees and scribes. She takes his response, stands up to what the response means, and then turns Jesus' words upside down and inside out. "Sure, Jesus, I get it. But I don't care if the food you're sharing is meant for the chosen children or not. Because that doesn't mean that your loving and gracious Abba God wants everybody else to go starving. That can't be what you're saying, Jesus, is it? Even the dogs eat the crumbs, you know."

I can imagine a pause in the conversation that then takes place, as those words sink in. And then Jesus marvels in wonderment, I think as much at her guts and determination to say it as for what she said. When she challenges Jesus, he doesn't get angry. Instead, it is as if he smiles proudly at what she does. His response to her "in your face" ... acerbic, surprising, and bold retort ... is found in Matthew's account: "Great is your faith!"

Mark, though, doesn't call it faith. He defines it as "nerve." In this woman Jesus encounters someone who is so desperate for transforming her beloved daughter's life that she goes toe-to-toe with the Lord of Life. One commentator calls her a kind of "she-wolf" who has entered into the company of Jesus and his twelve sheepish disciples. And as the twelve see the ravenous look in her eyes, and the fury in her spirit, and the gut and determination she demonstrates in not backing down, you can almost sense that Jesus wants to say to his followers that this is the kind of spirit he expects them to have.

I love how Brian Blount, President of Union Seminary in Richmond Virginia, describes this persistent woman at Jesus' feet: "She's not so much an 'eat-em-all-up' kind of wolf, as a 'shake-em-up' kind of wolf. She doesn't devour flesh, but devours complacency. She consumes the tendency to follow without understanding. She annihilates the tendency to try to understand without believing. She obliterates the timid desire to hide behind safe tradition. She demolishes the tendency to get caught up in the commonplace of ritual and habit, and think that religious or academic routine is the same thing as faith. She eats up doubts and fears, and risks it all in the deviant hope that her hunger and tender needs shall be satisfied."

"... And every sheepfold or church, if you ask me," says Blount, "needs a wolf every now and then, needs somebody like this boundary-breaking, shut-up-refusing, back-talking, change-demanding, bold Syrophenician woman."

I think Jesus is telling us, in other words, that if that woman could stand up to our Lord, we ought to be able to stand up to anybody else or anything else on this planet, and dare to fight for our deepest needs, dare to raise our voices, and dare to reach after a higher hope than safe or conventional wisdom allows.

But I also think that Jesus, as he considers what this woman has said to him in a confrontational, yet transforming way, sees in her fierce eyes something of his own spirit and his own prophetic message to his very people. In many respects, as Jesus considered the state of religious practice and faith in the region of Judea and Galilee, he was proclaiming something like this:

"If this is the way the kingdom road is going, I'm heading for the off-ramp. I'm not going to follow. I don't care if the priests who follow in Aaron and Moses' footsteps are driving, because I'm going to go in another direction, even if I have to pave the road myself. I'm daring to raise a contrary voice. The cries of my people make me want to shout for a different direction, where the Sabbath doesn't stop healing, where the temple doesn't stop believing, where the authorities don't stop freedom, where the systems that bind and imprison don't stop liberation and can't hold God's people.

I hear their cries, I see their struggles, and I will join their cries and even howl against the night and the people who impose injustice until the world's ways and actions are changed, and until the needs of all are lovingly and justly attended."

This unnamed Syrophenician woman is one of the "little people" in Mark's Gospel who are presented to us as people of faith, among them: Jairus and his daughter, the Gerasene demoniac, the poor man with a withered hand, the young boy with five loaves and two fish, the deaf mute in the Decapolis. These little people in Mark's story have consistent traits which they

have in common – a childlike, often persistent faith; a desire ... sometimes desperate ... to be touched by the Lord; a disregard for personal status and power; and a yearning to be included within the family of God.

And wondrously, in his encounter with this Syrophoenician woman, one of these little ones, Jesus' sense of mission is expanded into a radical inclusiveness that changes the parameters of his mission in a most profound way. The social dynamics of status and honor and gender, fundamental in the life of antiquity, have been turned upside down to make way for the outcast and alien Gentile.

The Mark's story draws to a close with the people's being "astounded beyond measure. He has done everything well;" the people remark, "he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." The question now, though, is whether such good news will be shared by you and me in our time.

It is an extraordinary story, isn't it? And it is a story that is ultimately about Jesus. For it proclaims the irrepressibility of the reign and power of God in our Lord. Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote that

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil.

Crushed."

What the poet's sonnet affirms of God's splendor in the world, Mark's story affirms of God's life-giving and loving power in Jesus. It is the sign of God's ultimate and glorious purpose for this world. It flames out in the most unlikely places. And it gathers to a greatness in the experience of this woman at Jesus' feet, and the deaf-mute man in the Decapolis, and in the lives of who knows what other hearers, even here and now, in the presence of this word.

Let us pray: O Lord our God, you made your grace known through the teaching and healing of your Son Jesus. Open our ears to hear his message. Unleash our tongues to proclaim the good news. Open our eyes to see the people who need to be touched by his love. Use us, dear God, so that as we dare to share his story, in bold and authentic ways, other ears may be opened and other tongues unleashed. All these we pray in the name of him whose compassion never failed, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.