

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In last week's gospel text, Jesus took to task the Pharisees and scribes for their ideas of "purity" and their judgment of those who did not conform to their standards of piety. Now, as if to prove his point, Jesus heads off into "impure" territory, the Gentile region of Tyre.

It seems that Jesus is exhausted and seeking some "down time," as he "entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice". Even in this Gentile region, it seems, word has spread about Jesus. He cannot escape demands for his healing power.

The woman who approaches Jesus breaks through every traditional barrier that should prevent her from doing so. She is "a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin". In other words, she is implicitly impure, one who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. She is also a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man...another taboo transgressed.

On top of all of this, her daughter is possessed by a demon. Although we are not told exactly how the demon affected her daughter, we can probably guess from other stories about demon-possessed people that it made her act in bizarre and anti-social ways. This woman and her daughter were not the kind of family most people would be likely to invite over for dinner.

Any way you look at it, this woman is an outsider. And what is more, Jesus actually has the nerve to say as much to her face. When the woman falls at his feet and begs him to heal her daughter, Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs". The "children" in this statement are the children of Israel, the "little dogs" (kunaria) are understood to be all other peoples.

This response by Jesus is harsh. How could he say such a thing? He appears to be quoting a bit of Jewish folk wisdom, but that does not lessen its sting. Some interpreters propose that Jesus is testing the woman to tease out her affirmation of faith. Others propose that here we see we see the very human side of Jesus, exhausted and needing a break, or perhaps not yet understanding the scope of his own mission.

While we cannot know exactly what Jesus was thinking, it is clear that when approached by the Syrophenician woman, the immediate response of Jesus is to appeal to the limits of his mission, his call to serve his own people. In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus begins by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24).

But, when this tenacious mother comes back at him with her clever response, "Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs", Jesus can only agree.

"For saying that, you may go, Jesus says. The demon has left your daughter". Jesus can only agree that God's love and healing power know no ethnic, political, or social boundaries. "So she

went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone”.

Next, from Tyre, Jesus heads off to the region of the Decapolis, also Gentile territory. Perhaps he is still seeking to escape notice and to rest a bit, or perhaps he has a new vision of his mission beyond the borders of his home territory. In any case, once again escaping notice proves impossible. “They brought to him a deaf man who also had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him”. And, like the Syrophenician woman, this man too is an outsider. He is cut off from the world by his inability to hear and communicate with others.

This time, Jesus does not hesitate to respond to a desperate request, though he does take the man aside, away from the crowd. In a very earthy scene, Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears, spits, and touches the man’s tongue, and then says “Ephphatha!” which in Aramaic means, “Be opened!” Immediately, the narrator tells us, “the man’s ears were opened and his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly”. Suddenly this man is able to hear and communicate with those around him. Not only is he physically healed, he is also restored to his community.

This sequence of stories is especially appropriate today, a Sunday which is likely to be the beginning of the program year. We are invited to think about where the focus of our congregational life and activity is found. Of course, spiritual nourishment for the faithful is essential, but the congregation’s mission cannot end there. Like Jesus himself, his disciples are continually called to a larger vision of mission...one that aims to embrace the outsider, the stranger, even the enemy.

The challenge of Mark’s gospel, embodied so powerfully in this story, is to perceive a God who is active, breaking into the world, and in a way that does not conform to the norms of human institutions...be they religious, social, or political, to the extent that such things can even be separated from one another.

Everything we’ve shared here so far is the easy part. We ought not be surprised at ethnic tension in a text from early Christianity. And, although disappointed, we also should not be surprised to see problematic gender dynamics emerging from an ancient patriarchal culture. The question becomes: how does this text interface with our world today?

This text suggests that we ask the following: Whose are the marginalized voices today who are speaking truth to power? Where might God be active in a way that our power structures are unable to control or domesticate? As a white male and product of the academic establishment, I am not sure I have the right to answer such questions.

Even so, many modern Christians may see this dynamic in Mark’s Gospel and move immediately to advocacy. We decide who is marginalized and provide a voice for them. We try to nibble around the edges by selling fair trade coffee or driving a Prius. These are not bad things, but they do very little.

Mark's Gospel testifies to the utter change enacted through a real encounter with those who are marginalized or excluded.

A profound example of this is provided to us through the life and work of a little-known Roman Catholic Priest, Father Joseph Wresinski. He grew up in abject poverty in France. He started a group called the "Fourth World Movement" that seeks to eradicate poverty by bringing together people from all walks of life.

Father Joseph, in his book "Blessed are You the Poor", seeks to uncover the radical nature of a gospel of ENCOUNTER, especially through his own experience with persistent poverty. He claims that the gospel is much more than a text to be read. The gospel is a place to go to experience those who have been "mutilated by extreme poverty," a land where he said that "I can go and meet with men and women familiar in speech and gestures and ever worthy of love". This means that we can only get access to what he calls an "immeasurable grace" through the poor.

"Only the very poor can obtain it for their more privileged fellow people."

These are radical ideas, and certainly present certain theological problems. They are, however, exegetical, or defensible through critical explanation or interpretation of the text. They cut to the heart of Mark's observation about God's activity and the encounter of Jesus with the woman. That is the key to our understanding today...found in the word, ENCOUNTER. The gospel is not just advocacy or social programs. It is, at its core, Encounter that changes. And, at its core again, that commitment from the heart to make a determined Encounter is why it is too difficult for so many of the hearers of Jesus, so that many drifted away.

We give thanks for the courageous suggestion that Jesus may have had something still to learn. And for the perhaps more courageous idea that, in the uncontrollable world of God, it is those on the margins who are in a position to teach even the Chosen One of God.

Encounter does change and the lack of it is a very significant barrier to genuine understanding. It is in the blessed center of need and want, creating relationship and communication, that brought forth the courage of this woman who went face to face with Christ and helped him to hear.

May we have that courage to encounter the world about us, in the loving and blessed name of God, revealed to us as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.