

“Standing Up to Jesus”

Sunday, September 10, 2006

Mark 7:24-37

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

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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, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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.’ ²⁸But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ ²⁹Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’

Prayer.

Setting the Story:

- Jesus went to a foreign territory and town (Tyre), enters a house and didn't want anyone to know he was there.
- Jesus was unable to escape notice.
- The woman was an unwanted guest.
- The woman submitted herself by bowing at his feet.
- Gentile woman, Syrophenician in origin, who lived in Tyre.
- She begged him to cast the demon from her daughter.

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Ritual Purity Rules - Purity Rules Exclude

- Demon possessed Gentile daughter was considered unclean. The mother who had contact with an unclean child would have been unclean. The mother, coming to Jesus, threatened his purity. Is this another instance of breaking the purity rules?
- And which takes precedence, breaking purity rules or extending the kingdom to gentiles?
- Robert Beck concludes: In this case, Mark is not abrogating the purity rules (7:1-23) in order to make room in the kingdom for the gentiles, but rather he is extending the invitation to gentiles in order to complete his abrogation of the purity rules. (p. 83)ⁱ
- The Purity Rules that sought to exclude were wrong, and Jesus meant to correct them.

Rules of Honor and Dishonorⁱⁱ

- Different Culture: Non-western, non-individualistic.
- “Collectivists” whose identity is found in terms of groups.
- Honor regards the group who extends affirmation and identity to its members. Honor is rooted in what the group values and accepts as worthy of approval
- Woman: not family or related to Jesus, therefore it would be expected that she would be distrusted.
- Jesus' first response is naturally cultural:
In Jesus' statement (v. 27), the “children” are presumably Jews; Jewish writers sometimes referred to Gentiles as “dogs”. Jesus says that he comes principally to Jews.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Jesus' second response, however, is counter-cultural: a reversal of conventional honor-related expectations, which was very consistent with Jesus: the last shall be first and the first shall be last, give your life to save your life, give away all you have to find wealth.
- Jesus resists various markers of ascribed honor common to his day and culture.
The woman's witty retort (v. 28) shows that she has faith in him: there is a place for non-Jews in God's plan.^{iv}
- Jesus redefines how honor is truly identified:
Jesus accepts her claim (v. 29). The daughter is completely cured (v. 30).^v
- Honor is found by inclusion into God's kingdom: the inclusion of a stranger, a foreigner, an unclean individual, a woman, a person who doesn't share the same faith.

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Implications for Today

Let us ask ourselves: How do we exclude people on a large scale (in society)? On a small scale (in our neighborhoods and schools)? On a faith scale (in our church?)

- Wall people off:
 - Large Scale: building prisons, create borders and limit immigration,
 - Small Scale: economics to keep them in different neighborhoods,
 - Faith Scale: by being cold to people who are not “just like us,” labeling them “sinners,” or people who don't share our exact beliefs.
- Don't talk to strangers:
 - Large Scale: pull our diplomatic corps / sever foreign relations.
 - Small Scale: we keep to our own kind, allow our self-centered agenda to dominate and never allow the other to speak, those who don't fit into clicks and just aren't allowed in.
 - Faith Scale: denominations, allow fear to define our differences, judge sinners guilty and condemn them to hell.
- Allow injustice to go unchallenged:
 - Large Scale: If “nation building” is nothing more than last century's “colonialism.” Or using violence and intimidation while issues of poverty and ignorance are not addressed. Or when money and profit comes before people and needs.
 - Small Scale: we allow the scales of justice to become unbalanced, venerate law and order while allowing the conditions that create crime to be unaddressed.

William Sloan Coffin observed that “Ninety-eight percent of people in prison in the United States lived in poverty most of their lives. Nearly 1 of every 150 people in this country is imprisoned, a number no other democracy comes close to matching.”^{vi}
 - Faith Scale: allow human will substitute for God's will. We accommodate dysfunctional relationships or avoid conflict to appease politeness.
- How do we exclude people today?

We owe a debt of thanks to this Gentile Woman. She caused Jesus to rethink, to respond counter to the cultural assumptions of his day. She makes us consider new and creative ways we can become like Christ; to become the inclusive means of healing in our broken, exclusive world. Let us ask this day: How can we become more inclusive, especially to those the world excludes?

- Large Scale: Open dialog, address underlying poverty and injustice? Can we export more food and education, and fewer weapons and systems?

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- Could we place more emphasis on rehabilitation and less on punishment?
- Small Scale: Are there helpful ways to distribute wealth more fairly and equally? Is it possible to celebrate diversity and recognize it as a gift that adds value to our neighborhoods and places of work? Can we bring an end to gender, race, and faith discrimination? Is it possible to have a fulfilling job for every adult, to offer equal opportunity to all?
 - Faith Scale: to replace judgment with mercy? Can we welcome all (without hesitation or reservation)? Can we hold each other accountable and responsible for our actions, while protecting each other's dignity and pride? Can we begin to value each person as a child of God.

Too often we face the overwhelming nature and complexity of the problems of the world and we throw up our hands and quit before we even get started. We use excuses like, "well, none of us are perfect" or "what can I do?"

I'm not saying that Jesus recognized that he was imperfect. But even the blind can see that in today's Gospel Jesus is called to accountability by a Gentile, foreign, unknown, unclean woman. And as a result, he makes changes ... to end her exclusion ... to begin by re-defining what true honor really is ... Jesus adopts an inclusive posture, that today, we recognize with hind-sight, is consistent with the life and ministry of Jesus.

We can begin by taking just one step, just one step towards being more inclusive in our world, in our lives, and in our faith; and in doing so, we are faithful to Christ's call, and we stretch and enlarge God's emerging kingdom.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me this day. Thanks be to God! Amen.

- i Beck, Robert R. *Nonviolent Story: Narrative Conflict Resolution in the Gospel of Mark*. Orbis, 1996. Paper, 206 pages.
- ii Watson, David F. THE "MESSIANIC SECRET": Demythologizing a Non-Existent Markan Theme. *Journal of Theology*, Summer 2006, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH.
- iii Haslam, Chris, As found at: <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/bpr23m.shtml>
- iv Ibid.
- v Ibid.
- vi Coffin, William Sloane. *Credo*. WJK Books, 2004, page 50.