

Remember the Outsiders

Mark 7:24-37

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

A famous minister was scheduled to preach at a small church out in the country.

It was such a small church that it only had seating for about a hundred people.

When that Sunday came, every seat in the sanctuary was filled, and a crowd of people was standing outside.

Since the church was a small one, it didn't have a sound system.

So just before the preacher was about to begin his sermon,
one of the ushers went up to him and said,

"Speak up! Remember the people on the outside."

II

Remember the people on the outside.

That's what both of our readings from Mark and James are about.

James tells us not to favor the well-healed and the well-connected over the poor and the needy.

God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom of God.

Remember the poor...
the outsiders...

the outcasts, James tells us,
and treat them with the same honor that God treats them.

In our gospel lesson, you probably couldn't find anyone who was more of an outcast and an outsider than the woman who went up to Jesus and begged him to heal her daughter.

She was an outsider simply by virtue of her gender.

What has been true in many times and places was true in Jesus' day—
women didn't count for much.

For example, in order to have a *minyan*, a prayer service in a Jewish synagogue, you needed to have at least ten men present.

You could have 100 women show up at the synagogue,
but unless there were at least 10 men, the *minyan* could not be held.

Even today women in many parts of the world still aren't looked at as being equal to men.

In some Middle Eastern countries, all it takes for a man to divorce his wife is for him to say to her, "I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you."

He doesn't have to give her any reason.

He doesn't have to pay her any alimony.

All the man has to do is say three times in the presence of witnesses, "I divorce you."

One small victory for women occurred some years ago when an Egyptian court ruled that a man wasn't allowed to divorce his wife by using e-mail, but that he had to say "I divorce you" in person.

Women were kept in their place, and unescorted women didn't just march up to famous men like Jesus and make demands—it just wasn't done.

Besides being a woman, this person was also an outsider because of her nationality.

The text says that she was a Gentile, a Syrophoenician, from the region of Tyre.

Tyre was historically a bitter enemy of Israel,
a reputation that continued into the time of Jesus and beyond.

Tyre accumulated at least some of its material wealth by exploiting the rural areas of Galilee.

Here in this story, boundaries are blurred.

On the one hand, a woman typically understood as powerless in a patriarchal society begs a man for a favor.

On the other hand, a Gentile from Tyre, member of an exploiting privileged class, asks a Galilean Jew to cast the demon out of her daughter.

The fact that her daughter is possessed of a demon is a further stigma.

No, this isn't like when you say,
"Oh, my grandson Jimmy can be quite a little devil."

No, this Syrophenician woman from Tyre had a daughter who had a real-life demon inside of her.

Ancient peoples had a strong belief in the power of demonic spirits.

They also believed that many physical and mental illnesses were caused by such spirits,
and that such things happened because of a person's sin,
or the sin of the parents.

Having a daughter so afflicted would be a terrible shame for this mother.

We aren't told exactly how the demon affected the little girl.

Mark 5 tells about a man who was possessed of an evil spirit that caused him to run around a graveyard naked and howling all the time—
not the kind of person you would invite to the next party you were having at your house.

Nor would you invite this woman who approached Jesus,
for she was an outsider in every way possible.

III

Now comes one of the most shocking and problematical moments in the whole of the gospels.

Jesus calls her an outsider to her face and uses an ethnic slur in the process.

Most of the time we assume that Jesus was nice to everyone,
and that he automatically helped everyone who asked him.

But here, when the woman begs Jesus to come and heal her demon-possessed daughter, he says to her,

“Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first. If there’s any left, the dogs get it.” (The Message)

Here is Jesus calling a woman *a dog*,
a common ethnic slur at the time.

This should stop us in our tracks.

A variety of mental calisthenics has been used by New Testament scholars to explain why Jesus called a woman a dog.

Some suggest that this is an example of Jesus’ famous “sense of humor.”

We are asked to imagine Jesus’ eyes dancing with a glint of laughter and winking at the woman.

Others say he was teaching his disciples a much-needed lesson.

I find it far-fetched that Jesus would emotionally abuse a woman in order to make a point.

Other interpreters point out that the word used for “dog” in Greek is the diminutive “little puppy.”

Of course, white Americans have had their own diminutive versions of racial slurs to imply endearment.

Dominant, oppressive cultures have a long history of assuaging their own latent guilt with terms of endearment for those they are abusing.

Add the word “little” to any ethnic, racial, or sexist slur you can think of—
does that really make it any better?

Some say Jesus was not actually refusing the woman, but testing her.

That is, the rebuff, the insult, the rejection are really a means of testing her faith, to see if she really, really believes in him. And, of course, she passes.

The trouble with this interpretation is that...

- a) nothing like it occurs anywhere else in the Gospel of Mark,
- b) there is no mention of testing in the story (as in Job, for instance), and
- c) it creates a rather cold-hearted picture of a God who taunts and tests us in our deepest moments of need.

How do we solve this exegetical conundrum?

David Henson writing at Patheos.com gets to the heart of the matter:

To be clear, while there is some debate about the social and cultural dynamics at work here, Jesus holds all the power in this exchange. The woman doesn't approach with arrogance or a sense of entitlement associated with wealth or privilege. Rather she comes to him in the most human way possible, desperate and pleading for her daughter. And he responds by dehumanizing her with ethnic prejudice, if not bigotry. In our modern terms, we know that power plus prejudice equals racism.

IV

The way I have to make sense of it is to look at the broader context in Mark's gospel.

Jesus has been healing people,
feeding multitudes,
calming stormy seas,
and disputing with Pharisees non-stop.

Now, Jesus takes a side trip to Tyre to get away from it all.

Mark says he entered the house and did not want anyone to know he was there.

Or, as the Revised English Bible puts it,
he “would have liked to remain unrecognized.”

Unrecognized—have you ever wished you could be that way?

Every celebrity knows the burden of becoming so recognizable that they become virtual prisoners in their own home.

It is said that Elvis Presley couldn't leave his home at Graceland because wherever he went, he was immediately mobbed by his fans.

There are times in our own lives when we feel the way Jesus felt.

We hear pleas to help the refugees trying to make their way across Europe.

But after a while, we think to ourselves,

"I can't be worrying about people on the other side of some ocean; we have enough problems right here in our own country."

Then we think to ourselves,

"Hey, I can't get worked up about the troubles that people are having all across this country, with fires out west and drought in California. There's just too much. No, there are enough troubles right here in my own town."

But then we eventually decide,

"Hey, I can't try to help everyone. In fact, even in my town, I don't know most of the people who live here. Maybe what I should do is just take care of myself."

Isn't that the tendency that we all have—
to keep shrinking down the number of people that we care about?

We justify that in our minds by writing other people off as outsiders.

After all, if someone is an outsider to me,
 what responsibility do I have for them?

We're in good company when we do that,
 because that's exactly what Jesus did when this desperate woman came to
 him pleading for the health of her daughter.

V

But the Syrophenician woman doesn't give up.

This woman—
 an outsider—
 risked shame and scorn to enter a home where she was not wanted
 to throw herself in front of a man who did not want to see her.

But she doesn't let his words stop her.

She knows who she is
 and why she is there
 and she has just the right response:

**“Of course, Master. But don't dogs under the table get scraps dropped
 by the children?”**

Have you ever needed the perfect “comeback” for some blowhard at a cocktail
 party and you stood there and said nothing...
 then later that night,
 after going to bed perhaps,
 the perfect response finally came to you?

“I should have thought of it sooner,” you fume.

There's a *Seinfeld* episode where George spends the entire show trying to come up
 with a brilliant comeback, the ultimate rejoinder.

He can't, of course, and neither can most of us.

This woman says exactly the right thing at the right moment.

"Lord, you call me a dog. And maybe that's all I seem to you. But you know what? Even the dogs under your table get to eat the scraps that fall to the floor.

"So if you don't want to welcome me to sit down at your table, fine. But at least give me your crumbs. Because your crumbs are more than I have right now."

Jesus is astounded, the holy wind knocked out of him.

A moment before, she was but a dog to him.

In the next, the scales fall from his eyes as he listens to her and sees her for what she truly is,
a woman of great faith.

It earns her the praise of Jesus and the health of her daughter.

Jesus does the most difficult thing for those of us born into privilege, prejudice, and power.

He listens...he listens and he allows himself to be fundamentally changed.

There is a passage in the New Testament book of Hebrews that some people find rather surprising,
because it says that although Jesus was the Son of God,
he learned obedience through the things that he suffered.

In other words, it took time for Jesus to fully learn what it meant to live as the Christ.

We often assume that when Jesus was lying there in the manger in Bethlehem, he already fully knew what it meant to be God's Son.

But I believe this story today is one of those occasions when Jesus learned in a powerful way.

And what he learned,
or at least what he was reminded of,

is that if we believe that our God is the only God,
 then that God must be the God of all people,
 even the people we think of as outsiders.

VI

Remember the Caucus Race in *Alice in Wonderland*?

The Dodo marked out a race-course and then all the party were placed
 along the course, here and there.

There was no “One, two, three, and away,” but they began running when
 they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when
 the race was over.

However, when they had been running half an hour or so, the Dodo
 suddenly called out “The race is over!” and they all crowded round it,
 panting and asking, “But who has won?”

At last the Dodo said, “EVERYBODY has won, and all must have
 prizes.”

When it comes to the amazing grace of our Lord, everybody has won and all
 receive the prize of God’s mercy and grace.

The outsider becomes the insider because of grace.

Where the traditions of the elders and the religious law saw only an outsider,
 Jesus sees the heart of faith of a desperate woman.

From this moment on, Jesus does not hold his saving power in reserve.

He expands the circle of God’s mercy to include all those once considered
 outsiders.

He opens the whole world to his mission.

He welcomes all who put their faith in him.

The day the gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to you and me.

VII

As we gather at the Table of the Lord, who's missing?

Who have we written off or dismissed?

Who have we left on the outside?

This is the Lord's Table and it is meant for all of God's people.

Remember the outsiders.

Amen.

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