

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 18 Year B

I remember so fondly the number of sermons during which Mother Betsy would talk to us about “cranky Jesus?” Do you remember them too? It was in that stretch in the lectionary, usually in the summer, when Jesus was just plain miserable, pushing us every which way, speaking to us one week about giving up all our possessions, and then next week about how he came not to bring peace, but division within families, or chastising us for praying in public.

Well, this week, we have moved from cranky Jesus to downright rude Jesus. Jesus, in his response to the Syrophoenician woman is terribly demeaning and offensive, and it's hard for us to know what to do with that remark.

Some commentators simply want to explain the rude comment away by drawing on our sympathy, and describing the scene in which this is only the second time Jesus has come into Gentile territory and the first one didn't go so well, so he's naturally and understandably defensive and perhaps even a bit offensive, anticipating a negative reaction. The first time in Gentile territory, he exorcised the demon from the deranged man who lived in the graveyard and sent his demon into a legion of pigs, and the townspeople were so angry with him that their livelihood was destroyed, that they forcibly asked him to leave.

Another option to erase away the rudeness of Jesus is that we can imagine Jesus was just plain tired and we can empathize with that. We know he had just had this immense and intense argument with the Pharisees we heard last week about the impurity laws and Jesus was frustrated that they didn't seem to comprehend that it wasn't what they put in their mouths that defiled them, but it was the boundaries they saw in their hearts, that kept some people in while others out, which were the source of defilement. And we all know what it feels like to be pushed to our limits of exhaustion, and we know the recovery time required can be quite substantial.

Some other commentators play around with the translation of the text and imagine the word “dog” really doesn't mean “dog” said in a derogatory way, but rather really means puppies or pets, and we are invited to imagine that Jesus doesn't mean the insult as we hear it today, but the slur was actually a term of endearment.

However, all indications are, through proper Biblical scholarship, that Jesus meant his remark as an insult.

Now this can be a hard fact for us to grapple with. It certainly pushes up against our image of Jesus the good shepherd, who calls all into his flock, or Jesus the wise teacher who is the source of truth, or Jesus, the lover of all souls.

However, rather than adopting a kindler, gentler version of this text, I invite you to hold onto the tension it may cause within you of what you want to believe about Jesus and the reality presented in our text. I promise I'm going to help you pull the tension apart a bit, so you can understand why this statement grates so on your soul, but then we'll go on to find the good news, which is in the woman's response and then Jesus' response to her. There is redemption in this story; we just have to keep moving along to find it.

This image of Jesus saying a degrading and dismissive statement to someone who lived outside the boundaries of the accepted world of the Pharisees, a woman who by their standards was unclean on three accounts: her ethnicity (being a Gentile) and her gender (being a woman) and the object of her caring (a female child who would have had not rights in their society) may bump up against our comprehension of Jesus' full divinity, which is what our theology tells us: that Jesus was both fully human AND fully divine.

For some of us, Jesus' divinity is the hard part to comprehend. We may still scratch our heads and wonder, "How can it be this person, who lived among mere mortals, embodied, or had made incarnate, the glory of God?" We may be more comfortable with the notion of Jesus as teacher, or prophet, moral example, or friend, than we are with Jesus as divine presence, because we're not quite sure how Jesus was also God.

And yet, our BCP, in our Eucharistic Prayer D highlights Jesus' divinity within a human body by offering the following sense of God, by the way our salvation story is told through the salvific acts of God:

When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you. Again and again you called us into covenant with you, and through the prophets you taught us to hope for salvation. Father, you loved the world so much that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior, Incarnate by the Holy Spirit born of the Virgin Mary, he lived as one of us, yet without sin.

Without sin. These key words, which point to Jesus' divinity housed with a human body, is the truth we want to hold onto in regard to Jesus' divinity.

But then we have this caustic statement of Jesus today, which doesn't seem to express the larger picture, which seems to indicate that some people are outside the love of God, which seems to set boundaries which speak of a separation between God's people and "those people". That sounds like sin to me. That sounds like defilement within Jesus' heart, which Jesus was accusing the Pharisees of last week.

So now, perhaps, we see the human side of Jesus, which for an instant, and only an instant, overshadowed the light of his divinity.

Maybe this is comforting to us, to know that Jesus actually shared some of the emotions, which seem to grab hold of us from time to time. Maybe his rude remark says to us that Jesus will somehow understand our degrading and rude remarks and think they're okay.

Maybe because we see Jesus buying into the prejudices which were ingrained in the society he lived in, we believe that Jesus will understand when we buy into the prejudices ingrained in our society and Jesus won't demand any more from us.

The redemption in this story is that Jesus is transformed from his prejudicial point of view, nearly instantaneously because he's touched by love, the love this woman has for her daughter. Jesus immediately gets and responds to the corrective power of love and moves into a whole different place of understanding his mission and the scope of God's love. Jesus has moved from believing he is here for the children of Israel to understanding, with compassion in his heart, he is here for all children.

Today has been designed by The Episcopal Church as the day for "Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism Sunday. We are honoring this request by including special prayers and a different Confession and Forgiveness in our service, and will continue this conversation in the our church calendar, in February, when we celebrate God's continued work in freeing the oppressed and examining our part in this holy work of God. We are doing this, in solidarity with all our ecumenical partners, and in response to a call to us from our sisters and brothers in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

And it's perfect for today, for Jesus, sadly shows us in our text today that prejudice can be so ingrained in a society that we can speak it and live it, without perhaps even being aware of it. Jesus got a wake up call today and we are invited into that same awareness and corrective response today.

Like Jesus, we need to be attentive to an alternative voice; we need to be able to listen deeply to those whose voices are hushed in our society; we need to clear away the barriers set within our communities which systematically make people mute. We need to listen for the voice of love, never being attuned to the voice of hate.

In our text today, the mother's voice made the difference. Mark doesn't have Jesus say to the woman, as Matthew does, "Your faith has made you well." In Mark's version of the good news, Jesus says, "because of your word, go". The good news is that Jesus allowed the voice of an outcast, a non-Jewish woman, who was worried about a female child of no worth to anyone but her, to open his eyes to the broader mission of God. May we need to do this, too.

This woman knew something that Jesus, at the moment, is not portrayed in Mark's gospel as knowing: She knew the abundance of God's provision. She knew that she didn't need it all; she didn't need to receive the full banquet designed for the

children of Israel, she needed only a crumb from their table, for God's crumb of love, would be enough --- and more.

Jesus calls us to this kind of discipleship – of knowing that God has given us all that we deeply desire – and it is more than we need. And this gift of abundant provision includes a call to respond to those, whom we see are in need of a just a crumb of our attention, our energy, our love, our passion, and to trust, as Jesus learned to do in today's text, that we know we can give it, freely, fully, and abundantly.

For those of you who walk a close path with me in the spiritual practices and conversations we have here, you have heard me mention numerous times this book which has really opened my heart these past few weeks: *Abide, Keeping Vigil with the Word of God*.

One chapter I recently read was about the revelation of God breaking into our lives, just as it did in Jesus' very humanly life in our text today. One of the sets of questions to ponder at the end of the chapter was: What kind of disciple are you? Is there anything you would need to change in your life in order to be able to say with conviction, "It is not my life I am living; it is Christ who is living in me".

Part of that answer about what we all perhaps need to change in our lives in order to say with conviction, "it is Christ who is living in me" is to put intention around hearing clearly the voices which are made dim by the prejudices of our society and to discern our particular work in that bigger picture of Christ. Perhaps your particular work is that of removing barriers that keep the truth hushed, or perhaps your particular work is to be an advocate for silent sufferers, as I am for victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse; or perhaps your particular work is deeply listen to one person whose opinion is normally not regarded. Or perhaps your particular work is to find your own voice, as contrary as it may seem to popular opinion, and voice it, shouting it loudly from the rooftops, almost screaming the world into being through your voice of love.

Here's the prayer, which concludes the chapter:

Surprising and dynamic God, You break into my life in unexpected ways; a personal stormy moment, a field of wildflowers, a cup of tea with a friend, a special book, a prayer with someone who is discouraged, a Sunday morning Eucharist, a leaf falling from a tree, an interruption, a surprising insight. You call me into the sacred circle of life. You clothe me with Christ-Power. You called me before my birth. You opened my eyes and my heart to moments of revelation. See free in me any resistance to being your disciple! May I never hide my voice again. Amen.