

“Detours on the Journey of Faith”

Mark 7:24-37

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On the bulletin cover this morning is a 15th century painting depicting the scene I just read in Mark 7. A woman is begging Jesus to heal her daughter who is, according to the mother, possessed by a demon. The daughter can be seen through the window of the house in the center right portion of the painting. Jesus turns away from her in the upper portion of the painting. However, the woman persists.

Jesus is out in Gentile territory, beyond the bounds, out among foreigners, Gentiles, a long way from home. Jesus has gone up to Tyre to get away from people, to retreat from the crowds who follow. He goes into someone’s house and shuts the door. Have you ever felt that way? Most of us have at some point in our lives, maybe more times than we would like to remember. Let’s shut everyone out. Give me some peace and quiet. We can hardly blame Jesus. He has been at the center of attention now through six chapters of Mark’s gospel. His reputation was getting around. Now comes this Gentile woman who wants Jesus to heal her daughter. Unfortunately, she is the wrong kind of woman. She is a foreigner, a stranger to the promises of Israel, and what Jesus says to her makes us blush.

First, Jesus just ignores her. Ignores her! Then, to make matters worse, Jesus’ disciples say, “Send her away, Jesus, for she is crying after us, disturbing us. Make her stop whining and go away.” And Jesus backs them up! And then he turns to her and says, “Lady, (and this was the line that Mark couldn’t get out of his mind) I wasn’t sent to help your people. I wasn’t sent to help your daughter.” Jesus tells her, “It is improper to give the bread of the children, meaning Israel, to the dogs (gentiles). Is this Jesus speaking? Do I need to check my Bible to make sure that is right? Yes, it is Jesus speaking very good first century sociology. Things were very simple back then. The world was divided up between *us* and *them*. If you were Greek it was the Greeks and the barbarians. If you were Jewish it was the Jew and Gentiles. If you weren’t one of us then you were one of them, the pagan and ungodly. A Jew would cross the street if he saw a gentile coming in the opposite direction not wanting to breathe the same air. A Jew would do business with a gentile but just that, business. My, how the times have changed right? We are all just one happy family now. Everyone is equal in everyone’s eyes. Except for the first world people and the third world peoples, the poor and the rich, the smart and the not-so-smart and the list could go on and on.

The woman responds to Jesus by saying, “Even the pups under the table get the scrapes from the children.” Jesus says to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” Over in Matthew’s gospel the writer says it is because of her faith that the daughter is healed. Mark simply says the healing is because of this answer, this word, not her cleverness but “that the mercies of God should be made available to the gentiles now and not at some point in the distant future.” (*Christian Century*, August 18, 2015, pg. 47)

Our Lord calls this poor Syrophenician woman a dog! It’s not that Jesus doesn’t want to help suffering people. That’s what he has been doing constantly. His mission is to the children of

Israel, and who could be more oppressed and deserving than they? Over the last 700 years only a hundred years of freedom and now under the Romans for the last 90 years. He's got his hands full without this outsider pulling at him. Like a physician in a room full of seriously wounded people, if Jesus turns to help one, another may die.

She must have been thinking, "I hear all these great things about you. 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 up out of the grave. If you turn away from me, I am without hope. Please, help me. What you say about dogs is true," this gutsy mother replies, "but even dogs are allowed to clean up the children's crumbs."

"Touché," says Jesus. "Stranger, for a Gentile woman with very few street skills, you are almost smart." He heals her daughter.

You see the woman is a lot like Jesus. I think that is why Mark leaves her in his gospel. She is a lot like Jesus. She stands up to him the same way he stood up to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Earlier in this chapter Jesus had told the Jewish authorities they needed to lighten up a bit in their interpretation of the laws of Moses. Now, this woman is saying to Jesus, "You need to lighten up a little in your understanding of helping all of God's children."

From here, Mark takes Jesus on a ridiculous itinerary. He says that Jesus went from Tyre to Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the Decapolis—equivalent to saying that Jesus traveled from Athens to Washington D. C. by way of Tampa and New Orleans. The little maps in the back of my Bible reveal that Sidon is north of Tyre and the Sea of Galilee isn't any way near either one of them. You can't get there from here.

When Matthew tells this story later, he corrects this odd geography. Did Mark not know where these places were? Or is it possible that Mark intentionally told the story this way, blurring geography into a theology of what it's like to follow Jesus? Listening to today's Gospel, is a reminder that the gospel writers sometimes used geography to do theology.

Where is Jesus? He is in Tyre, for much deserved peace and quiet, but he couldn't rest. He is sought by someone who needs him, but she is the wrong sort of someone—a woman, a Gentile woman of Syrophenician origins, an outsider, a Gentile dog. Jesus reaches out and heals her daughter, even though her persistence required a detour. Jesus allowed himself to be sidetracked from his original intent, his original itinerary. A funny thing happened to Jesus on his way to heal Israel.

Jesus led his disciples out of Galilee, into Gentile country. Out there, places and people get mixed up, no one stays put, orderly and fixed. Out there, as the healings show, the message and compassion of Jesus are pushed to their geographic and ethnic limits. Through topsy-turvy geography, Mark says, "When you follow Jesus, be ready for surprises, unexpected circumstances, for people you didn't expect to meet."

Maybe Mark hasn't made a geographical mistake; he has made a theological statement. Mark knew where Tyre and Sidon were. He also knew where Jesus was: a new world where geography is not closed but open, where the future is not clearly mapped out but is subject to detours demanded by the unpredictable geography of God's grace.

This story shows that a “worthless Gentile girl whose mind was devoured by a demon” and a “good for nothing deaf man who couldn’t even speak clearly” were indeed children of God who were to be embraced and valued.

How do you think this story would play out today? Something like this Jesus story is being played out today with the migration of mainly Syrian refugees pouring into Europe. People who have been ravaged with civil war for more than half a decade are finally saying we have had enough and we need to find a new home. How will they be received? With skepticism? With open arms? Should the European nations, all 28 members of the European Union take their fair share? Jesus shows us that with God there are no barriers between God and any human beings: not class, not ethnicity, gender, age or physical condition. Consequently there should be no barrier between human beings. Do we leave them to die in Syria and say, “Isn’t that too bad but it’s not our problem? Do we allow them to die at sea as they struggle to cross the Mediterranean? It is a humanity problem.

This Gentile woman with Jewish hutzpah, this Gentile deaf mute man out there typify the way God’s unexpected geography gets us somewhere we would never have gone if we had simply stuck to the map.

How did I get here? Ask yourself that question, here in church, on a Sunday, following Jesus. How did I get here?

Jesus got to the Sea of Galilee by going north and east when he needed to go south. That’s the way it is sometimes with God’s geography.

Some of the world’s great scientific discoveries have occurred on the way to somewhere else. A good researcher travels with a willingness to be detoured.

She came by to see me saying, “I’ve got a problem.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well you see,” she said, “I am an economics major here. That’s what I always wanted to do. Well, this spring I finally got around to actually looking for a job.”

“And.”

“And,” she said, “this phrase kept cropping up in the conversation—‘if you are going to work for us, then you must be willing to give 150 percent. If you do that,’ they said, ‘then in ten or twelve years, you’ll be pulling down \$100K easy.’”

“\$100K isn’t that enough?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I don’t want to end up like them I want more.”

“More?” I asked.

“Yes, more. It’s not enough to give everything I’ve got for the company. A year ago, it was enough. Now it’s not.”

“So?” I asked.

“So, do you know where I can get a teaching job where the kids really need me, like at a church mission school or something?”

So I said, “Now look here God, she declared her major her Sophomore year and she should have stuck with it. Don’t let her get out of line.”

A friend of mine, a friend who has had a really tough time in life, said, “I really believe that everything that happens to me, does so because God wants it that way.”

“You really believe that?” I ask. “Well, I don’t mean it in any Pollyanna sort of way,” he said, “I mean that, looking back, even looking back on some of the very worst events in my life, it’s amazing how well it all turned out. It’s beautiful where it all led. It’s as if some unseen hand has guided me, to where I would never have gone if I was left to my own devices.”

I think that’s what’s called faith—the belief that God does order life, give direction, put odd people, strange circumstances together into an orderly whole.

One night, John Wesley was invited to a meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. Somebody was going to read Luther’s Preface to the Book of Romans, not a real exciting work by Luther. Well, Wesley went, as he said, “reluctantly,” and while he was there, unexpectedly, his heart was “strangely warmed.”

Strange things happen to those who try to follow, try to listen for what God wants them to do with their lives. Like Wesley, like the college eco major, they are sometimes sidetracked, surprised by God.

“Nothing bad ever happens to a writer,” is how one person put it. Everything, even the things you would not have planned, can be fuel for the imagination trained to be curious about the unexpected.

Jesus had turned away from the woman as the upper portion of the painting indicates. But the woman doesn’t give up. In the lower portion of the painting the woman is still begging Jesus. She is now in front of Jesus perhaps giving those words, “Even the pups under the table get the scrapes.” Jesus gives her a gesture of consent and healing—the reward for a desperate mother’s persistence. Maybe saying, “Your right lady. It is time for a new world.”

Perhaps it is too much too much to ask that we allow the image of a little boy, a drowning victim who washed up on a Turkish beach to invade our dining rooms on a Wednesday night as we watch the evening world news. “If the world leaders can’t work together to save these children they better find another planet to rule,” one activist wrote on Twitter. But it is not too much to ask humanity to recognize that there are no walls made of deaf ears or troubled minds separating us from God or us from each other. Status is a product of our own imaginations, invisible to God. Once we acknowledge that there are no walls separating us, love and mercy flow unfettered, and all *God’s children* are deemed equally valuable.

Jesus took the long way around to get to the Sea of Galilee because he got sidetracked by strangers.

