

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18) – Year B – September 9, 2009

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

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Who's your favorite rule breaker? Someone you admire for standing up for the greater good, for social justice, or equal rights, or for God's compassion and mercy in the world. I've always admired Rosa Parks for refusing to accommodate unjust racism, and Susan B. Anthony who fought for women's suffrage. Then there's Mother Teresa who affirmed the dignity of every human being in God's sight by caring for those that society deemed disposable.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is in largely Gentle territory, apparently on retreat from the crowds. In the previous story from Mark, Jesus has just finished instructing the Pharisees from Jerusalem about the hypocrisy of exclusivist attitudes and behaviors. The sort that have little to do with God's commandments and God's Word, but a whole lot to do with human precepts, otherwise known as keeping up appearances for the sake of self-righteousness. Despite trying to keep His visit quiet, Jesus' presence is quickly noticed.

Being fully human as well as fully divine, we can only guess as to whether Jesus really was on His last nerve at this point, especially when we get to listen in to what happens next. Jesus is approached by a Gentle woman, a Syrophenician, who seeks Him out begging for healing for her daughter. Speaking for myself, what I really want to know is what on earth is going on when Jesus -- lover of sinners and outcasts, boundary-breaker extraordinaire, healer of the sick, and God incarnate -- basically calls this woman a dog. It does appear a tad uncharacteristic and it's not as if Jesus was generally unfriendly to women, because He clearly isn't. In fact, Jesus brings Jairus' daughter back to life, and tells the hemorrhaging woman that her faith has made her well when she sneaks up and touches the fringe of His robes. Jesus is also a good friend of Mary and Martha, to name but a few. We don't want to lose sight of the bigger issue here, but we do need to address this remarkable and rather distracting comment of our Lord. I seriously doubt that the words, "What were you thinking?" will be my first question when I meet Jesus face-to-face, but even after everything I've read about this passage, I'm still left without a satisfying sense of resolution. So let's look at a few possibilities, and we can talk some more at coffee hour.

My least favorite conclusion concerning Jesus' comment comes from theological and Biblical scholars who have much greater knowledge than I ever will. It proposes that this is a point in Jesus' own spiritual growth when He begins to learn firsthand what God really means by sending Him to be the savior and redeemer of the *whole* world. It is also a point in Jesus' life where He is about to eat a little slice of humble pie, and change His mind. If, for you, this is an attractive part of understanding this passage, you are in good company, and please don't let anyone, especially not me, tell you differently. Having laid out that disclaimer - and I continue to speak for myself here - I still have to wonder whether the writer of Mark, who *is* known for his use of irony, is not simply being rather clever here to emphasize the point that Jesus has just made to the Pharisees about misinterpreting traditions. And to show that Jesus, in the fullness of His humanity, is also bound by the intent as well as the letter of God's commandments. While there is an apparent Biblical precedent that God is willing to consider human input and be persuaded to change God's mind - remember the conversation between Abraham and God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis chapter 18 - there is still something that niggles me in this proposal. More specifically, it has always seemed to me a very human desire, really amounting to nothing more than pride, to want to believe that we have some power over God, that by our own clever rhetoric you and I can change God's mind. Is it even true? Was it true for Abraham? Did he really have to give God a lesson in situation ethics, or was he just working out his own troubled mind over the death of hundreds of people? When we believe that we can change God's mind is it the same as saying that we would rather do our own will than God's will? Or are we saying that God might just get it wrong from time to time, and despite the major handicap of being sinful and highly limited creatures, you and I know may actually know better than God. Please forgive me for finding that rather hard to swallow.

Still, there is always more than one perspective, and here's another one for consideration. Given all the evidence, from the teaching of the prophets, to Jesus' own attitudes and behaviors concerning God's commandments around justice and equality, there is no doubt in my mind that Jesus would respond negatively to injustice. One of the questions we have not yet asked is just how could the Syrophenician woman have triggered such a negative response from Jesus? She approaches Jesus with great deference, bowing down at His feet and begging on behalf of her tormented daughter. To our modern ears that does not sound offensive, except maybe for the fact that we know she is a Gentile woman in the presence of a faithful Jewish man. Incidentally, it was quite common in Jesus' day for Gentiles to be referred to as dogs. More on that aspect in a moment. What we should notice here is that Mark takes the trouble to tell us that the woman is a Syrophenician. Isn't that obvious since she lives in Tyre, and Tyre is the large Phoenician port city in Syria? As we all know, the Gospel of Mark is the shortest account of Jesus' life and ministry, and Mark is very economical with his words. So we have to ask whether there might be an additional reason for Mark to specify this woman's ethnicity. In fact, history tells us that the Judeans, including Jesus, were the highly impoverished neighbors of the relatively wealthy Syrophenicians, and that the latter put no effort into closing that poverty gap. So let's play out the scenario. Wealthy Syrophenician woman comes to Jesus begging for help. Jesus remembers all His poverty stricken brothers and sisters and is pretty unhappy with the woman. He initially responds to her by basically saying that He only has time for His own people. Jesus' response is in this way strikingly familiar to her own attitude to helping her needy Judean neighbors. Jesus sounds annoyed because He hates injustice. From what we also know of God, it is perfectly characteristic that Jesus ends up healing her daughter. After all, no one but a hypocrite can preach justice and equality without demonstrating God's abundant mercy through gracious acts of loving-kindness.

We have already come a long way, and yet there is one more perspective to consider. When we look at the Greek word for "dogs" closely, there is a nuance that is easy to miss in the English. Jesus actually uses a diminutive when speaking to the woman, referring to her and her daughter as "little dogs". Okay, I know that doesn't actually sound much better, but there is more. About four hundred years before Jesus was even born, there was a philosophical movement out of Greece that was highly critical of current social and cultural conventions. Adherents to the movement tended to shun all conventions in their life-style and behavior. They were frequently characterized as aggressive, rude and shameless. In English the movement became known as the "Cynics", but in Greek the name is "dogs". Consider this, the Syrophenician woman's behavior was, according to cultural norms and traditions, quite shameless. The socially correct approach for the request of healing should have been made by the father or other senior male member of her family. Her shameless behavior is compounded by her persistence and daring rhetorical style in response to Jesus' comment that she is a little dog, that is a little Cynic. What Jesus actually says is also true, as the apostle Paul writes later, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

You and I can decide whether only some, all or none of these possibilities are closer to the truth about our own interpretation of the Word. This story does, however, reiterate the greater truth of Jesus' teaching. Neither religious custom, nor social convention should ever stand in the way of doing good to those in need. To practice God's graciousness to the fullest, you and I, have to show the world what it means to break the rules, in order to honor the broadest, most inclusive intent of God's commandments and God's Word.

Amen.