

“Inside Outsiders”

Following last week’s lectionary reading of Mark 7:1-23, where Jesus exchanges words with the Pharisees regarding ritual purity and the kosher food laws, today’s reading tells of two healings, both occurring to the north and northeast of Galilee. It is as if Jesus, having presented his teaching on what is clean and unclean to the Pharisees, moves now to “practice what he preaches” (so to speak); to put into practice his ministry to the “unclean,” to the outsider, or also known then as the “Gentiles.”

The gospels of Mark and Matthew are the only two to write of the encounter between the Syrophenician woman and Jesus. And it seems both see that Jesus is exhausted and seeking some “down time,” as he “entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice” (Mark 7:24). Even in this far away outsider gentile region, it seems, word has spread about Jesus. He cannot escape the demands and the requests for his healing power.

The woman who approaches Jesus breaks through every traditional barrier that should prevent her from doing so. She is “a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin” (Mark 7:26). In other words, she is impure and unclean, one who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. She is also a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man, an outsider inside unfamiliar territory – which for her, as a Gentile, was another cultural taboo that she disobeys.

On top of all this, her daughter is possessed by a demon. Although, we are not told exactly how the demon affected her daughter, we can probably guess from other stories about demon-possessed people that it made her act in bizarre and anti-social ways. This woman and her daughter were not the kind of family most people would be likely to invite over for a meal.

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Any way you look at it, this woman is an outsider. And what is more, as Mark tells it, Jesus actually has the nerve to say as much to her face. When the woman falls at his feet and begs him to heal her daughter, Jesus says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27). The “children” in this statement are the children of Israel, the “little dogs” (kunaria) are understood to be all other peoples (Gentiles).

Jesus’ response is harsh. How could he say such a thing? He appears to be quoting a bit of Hebrew wisdom here, but that does not lessen the hurt of Jesus’ words. What is more, in Matthew’s account Jesus’ disciples were urging him to tell the woman to leave their presence because she was unclean. But as Jesus was being asked to do two very different things on both sides, he remained silent to her needs and the disciples request.

This silence is uncharacteristic of Jesus. Doesn’t Jesus help everyone? Doesn’t he hear our concerns? I mean, he’s the one who hears our needs when we pray. If so why is it that he remains silent?

Some scholars believe Jesus is testing her, others just think this is the human side of Jesus being exhausted and wanting a break. I like to believe, that all of this *is* a test, but not for the Syrophenician woman, but for his disciples. How so?

When the woman comes back at Jesus with her clever response, “But sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mark 7:28), Jesus can only agree. “For saying that, you may go, Jesus says. The demon has left your daughter” (Mark 7:29). Jesus can only agree that God’s love and healing power know no ethnic, political, or social boundaries. “So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone” (Mark 7:30).

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The woman’s reply to Jesus makes her a model of persistent faith. She is a perfect example of Jesus’ parable in Luke 11:5-13. It reads...

In this story, Jesus uses a word that is found only once in all of the New Testament – “a-nah-ee-die-ah” meaning without shame, or better translated shamelessly persistent. The friend is shamelessly persistent which causes the neighbor to get out of bed and give the friend what he needs. The point Jesus is trying to make is that if even a friend goes to his neighbor with shameless persistence then we as Christians should go to God with any need we face in the same bold manner.

This is what the woman did when opposed by the disciples. Jesus was silent to the disciples, not the woman. His silence was a test, his silence spoke more words, his silence spoke that he was not contemplating on leaving or answering the woman’s needs but rather staying with her and showing the disciples how to have faith that is persistent. Her persistence based on her faith in a God who can change things for the better is rewarded.

What are we bringing to God shamelessly and with persistence?

Do we believe we will be rewarded through the trials and temptations that come?

Do we trust that Christ can change anything if we just be shamelessly persistent in our requests?

Do we have the faith in Jesus’ power and authority like the Syrophenician woman?

As a church are we listening to the needs of the outsiders? Because like the Syrophenician woman it could be that they may have more faith and knowledge on the inside being an outsider from the church.

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Let us pray:

Dear heavenly Father, for those of us who are used to having a place at the table, perhaps we need to be reminded that none of us has any right or privilege whatsoever to claim with God. We all come as beggars to the table, and it is solely by God’s grace that we are fed. Perhaps we need also to be reminded that God’s table is immeasurably larger than we can imagine. Therefore, have faith because there is grace in abundance for us all. Amen.