

Mark 7:24-30

The story we have just heard from Mark's gospel is one of the few times that the gospels show us Jesus in an interfaith encounter. It takes place in the region of Tyre, southern Lebanon, just across the border from Israel, then and now. Before 2006, Tyre was, in my mind, primarily a “Biblical place” – that is, before the war between Lebanon and Israel brought Tyre into my living room. The region of Tyre, on the border, has been hard hit in many of the wars that have rocked the Middle East over the past half century, especially the conflicts between Israel and the PLO in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. These political wars in the region are so often are religiously charged, a reflection of ongoing tensions between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Maybe in Morocco we’re more sensitive to underlying religious tensions, as we are part of this region of the world that doesn’t easily separate politics and religion. Unfortunately, in the minds of many of our Muslim neighbors in Morocco, the complicated political conflicts in Palestine and in Iraq boil down to Jews and Christians siding against Muslims (the Christian minority in both Lebanon and Iraq is so often ignored by all parties). But in America, I think we (myself included) have adopted a rather schizoid way of looking at these conflicts, adamantly denying that our own military involvement in Iraq or our supportive role of Israel has anything to do with religion, but at the same time viewing those with whom we are in conflict through a religious lens – we speak (and hear) of Muslim terrorists, Islamic extremists, Shiite or Sunni militias – it can have the affect of making folks on this side of the ocean feel like the fight is not simply between nations, but, indeed, between faiths. And so anything Arab and Muslim feels foreign, threatening, and dangerous.

Have you received the email explaining why no Muslim, not even a “moderate” can be a good American? How “we” should distrust “them” all in this country? The first reason offered is that Muslims owe their full allegiance to Allah and so can never give their full allegiance to the nation...

Hmm... Do you know that on the Friday after thanksgiving, a year and a half ago now, Jerry Klein, a Washington D.C. radio talk show host proposed that all Muslims in America, whether they were citizens or not, should be required to wear an armband with a crescent on it, or perhaps have a crescent-shaped tattoo visible? Klein is Jewish, and his comments were satirical, poking fun at America's paranoia, but what shocked him and made international news, were the many, many calls he received from folks in our nation's capital who didn't get the joke and thought it was a great idea. That's disturbing.

Well, this is not altogether unlike the world Jesus lived in, where social, political and religious tensions were often blurred, and crossing a border meant feeling those tensions more acutely, especially when one was in the minority. That's part of what happens here. But if the mere context of this story already has the potential to be disturbing, wait until we get to the content. Certainly, there are many stories in the Bible that have theologically disturbing content: for example, God commanding whole Palestinian cities to be destroyed by the invading army of his chosen people with no man, woman, child or animal left alive. That should bother us who claim to be followers of Jesus (even if Christian heads of state through the ages have found it politically expedient to take similar actions). But it bothers us, does it not? And fortunately for us, we can say, well those stories are in the Old Testament. As Christians we live under a New Covenant in which God's unconditional, unfathomable love has been revealed in Christ Jesus, a love extending to all people everywhere.

But this troubling story of the Syrophenician woman is in the New Testament. And what's more it's about Jesus. And even worse, that which we find troubling in the story comes from his own mouth: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." It seems that this Jew who has crossed the border into southern Lebanon has

called this woman of Tyre, a woman in need, though she be of a different faith and nationality, it seems he's called her a dog. (This is bad enough to our ears in the US where we love our dogs, but its many times worse in a Semitic context like Palestine or Morocco, where dogs are despised as unclean animals.) The words sound racist, implying that she and her kind don't deserve his attention, implying that those who are of the house of Israel are more valuable than those who are not, that it's an "us" and "them" situation, and we matter more than they do.

Alas, here it is Jesus himself who seems to be guilty of the very sin the epistle of James will rail against: making distinctions between those worthy of honor, respect, and love, and the poor, wretched folks who are not worthy and may be belittled. James says that such acts of favoritism show that one does not yet truly believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. But what if Jesus himself is among the guilty? What if Jesus, whom we believe was without sin, wasn't?

Scary thought, huh? If you look at a few commentaries on this passage, you can tell how scary this is for folks by how quick scholars are to perform exegetical gymnastics, stumbling all over the passage trying to defend Jesus: one proposes that this wasn't originally a story about Jesus, but rather another healing story that Mark incorporated into his gospel; another suggests that the statement was meant as a sarcastic comment intended to work in reverse, indicating Jewish prejudices by stating them openly; others propose that Jesus' intent was to test the woman's faith. (I think that's the one I heard in Sunday school.) Other commentators prefer to skip over the details of the story altogether, simply saying the story shows the expanding of Jesus' ministry to the Gentiles. One thing is sure: a part of the Bible that scholars would prefer to excuse, defend, gloss over, or ignore is clearly dangerous stuff.

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, says the old proverb. So maybe we would be foolish to consider this passage any further, and it would be wiser just to skip to the benediction

and escape to fellowship time. But I think we should go on, and maybe not rush in, but slowly work our way back into the passage with its disturbing questions that echo in our own time, but which may yet free us, brothers and sisters, to be God's people as we encounter neighbors of a different faith. Are you with me?

Mark begins this story with these words: From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. "From there" evidently means somewhere in Galilee where Mark tells us he has been traveling about teaching, preaching, healing and getting into arguments with Pharisees, who always make me think of Baptists. Anyway, it seems that the last fight wore him out, and he wanted to get away from it all. So he left Galilee where he was so famous, or perhaps infamous, and went north crossing into the Roman province of Syria, outside his home turf religiously and socially, where folks did not know him personally and would leave him alone. Or so he thought. Mark says he went into this particular house, maybe a house owned by a Jew, a friend of a friend, and that Jesus didn't want anyone to know he was there. He was on vacation. But it seems that the paparazzi had chased him down and revealed his secret, because the word that the Jewish healer from Galilee was in town immediately reached the ears of at least one local woman, and she wasn't about to let the opportunity pass. She was a mama, you see, and her daughter was messed up bad, under some kind of demonic attack, she was sure, and she didn't care what kind of taboos she might break, what this guy's religion was, or who she might have to argue with, she was going to get in to see the one person who might be able to help her little girl. So she did what she had to do. She barged into the house where she was not invited and not wanted and she bulldozed her way through to the place where Jesus was resting, and bowed down at his feet.

Something like this actually happened to me recently: a whole group of shepherds came to my house and one of them bowed down at my feet and started to kiss my boots to beg me

to intervene in a situation. In Berber culture, that's a way of showing utter humility to put the person before whom you bow under obligation to act nobly and grant your request. And I have to admit that I was not happy with this. And I take comfort in the fact that, in this story, Jesus also was not happy. You see, ever since the middle ages, we Christians have had a tendency to forget that our Lord and Savior was not only divine, he was also human. He was tired and he was on vacation and this woman had come here to take away any peace he had hoped to find in the city of Tyre. If word got out among the Gentiles in this northern region that Jesus was healing there, too, there would be no place left for him to go to be alone. (He had recently tried to get away to rest with his friends within Galilee, you may recall, but the crowd actually spotted the boat on lake Galilee and beat them to the other side to wait for their arrival and clamor for his attention.) This was a real problem for Jesus; Mark says so over and over again. He struggled not to become so famous, so well known because 1) he needed privacy, a place and time to relax and renew his own strength; 2) he had limits; he simply could not heal every sick person in Galilee, much less all of Palestine; and 3) his vocation was not simply to be a miracle man. He was about more than that and he was always in the process of discerning how to live out his unique calling, deciding where to set limits and where to give of himself.

One of the ways he had set his own limits was by making the decision to focus his ministry within his own community, among the Jews, his own people. He knew he couldn't go everywhere and do everything, so he sought a focus and, up to this point, had felt led in that direction. That is what he tells this Gentile woman in not so gentle words, actually quoting a proverb; the children, indeed meaning the Jews, are to be fed first. If he uses up all his ministry energy in Tyre, he will have nothing left to give when he goes back to Galilee. It would not be right to take the little energy he has and give it to the Gentiles, among whom he does not anticipate having a meaningful, effective ministry, when those to whom he feels called are hungry. Yes his

words are harsh; the proverb he uses is blunt. But he had to say no sometimes. And that is no sin. (We church people would do well to learn that from the Lord.) What he said, blunt as it was, was true to his discernment of his vocation up to that point.

But this woman refuses to take no for an answer. In a quick retort, she plays on his words, quoting another proverb in response: even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. It's perhaps something of a jibe back, implying that what he would do for her and her daughter would simply be a crumb, a scrap, not a very flattering description of his ministry. But it surprises Jesus, in more ways than one. He has seen this woman in all her faith and fierceness, in her intelligence and stubbornness, and he is moved. Marveling at her, he tells her, for saying that, you may go -- the demon has left your daughter. And so she leaves, trusting him, taking him at his word, and finds her daughter well and whole.

Jesus' words gave this Syrophenician woman a great gift, restoring her daughter to her. But the Syrophenician woman's words also gave Jesus a great gift, for he had, perhaps, not see that kind of fierce, obstinate, challenging faith in all of Israel. Brothers and sisters, Jesus grew in wisdom, if not in stature, that day. He learned from this woman more about who he was and what God was about in his life. To learn and grow is not sin; it is being receptive to God's voice as it comes through others. Though he had healed a Gentile before, the Gerasene demoniac, he had not seen the Gentiles as central to what God might be doing through him in the here and now. He was a Jew. He had grown up seeing the world as Jew and non-Jew (even more than I grew up seeing the world as Baptist and non-Baptist, and that is saying a lot). Every model for ministry he had ever seen had instilled in him that he would be working with his own people, to bring them to greater faith and faithfulness. That's what rabbis did. And as for the Gentiles, when God called them, they would come to Zion; their salvation would come through the Jews.

Indeed, according to Mark, Jesus had spent NO significant time in Gentile territory up to this point. He had not listened to them, hearing of their struggles, their fears, their hopes, their longings. But immediately after this experience, Mark says, Jesus returned from the region of Tyre and went by the way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee and into the region of Decapolis. Now some scholars have commented on this as Mark's bizarre geography; Sidon is north of Tyre, in the opposite direction from Galilee further south. And Decapolis, which includes the Golan Heights and part of what we now call Jordan, is still further south and east. Scholars find this nonsensical geographical path a rather embarrassing detail about Mark's account. But it makes sense if Jesus is intentionally NOT returning by the most direct path. It makes sense if Jesus has suddenly decided to return by another road whereby he might spend time seeing, experiencing, hearing, being with his Gentiles neighbors living in the lands surrounding Jewish country.

I have a hunch that I've never seen any commentator make, that what Mark is trying to tell us is that because of this brassy woman of the region of Tyre, Jesus broke out of some of the categories that had shaped his thinking and acting -- those that divided the world essentially into Jew and Gentile. That day in the south of Lebanon, some boundaries shifted within Jesus himself. He would still have to set limits for himself in his ministry, but the boundaries could no longer be drawn along ethnic/socio-political lines. He would walk the path of the Gentiles, for it seemed clear now that God had work for him to do among them, too. And as he traveled in Gentile territory, Mark tells us he healed, and he preached, and he taught for days on end. And before he had left, God would perform through him another miracle of multiplication of bread, seven loaves now and a few fish feeding thousands of people who received so much more than crumbs. These were Gentiles, not Jews, who would ever after sing God's praise because they, too, were included in the blessing of bread broken and shared for the multitude, eucharistia, thanksgiving for living bread.

Brothers and sisters of the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, this weekend, as we consider our relationship with Muslims, neighbors whose faith is different from our own, we, as those who would serve the Lord Jesus, must not consider ourselves above our master. We should, rather, learn from him and follow his example. We need to recognize and examine our own resistance to encountering Muslims and their faith: Are we just so tired from the work we are already doing that tackling anything new feels exhausting? Do we not know enough about Islam to speak intelligently about it and so we'd rather just avoid the topic, and hence, avoid our Muslim neighbors, rather than look dumb? Does the idea of relationship and encounter with Muslims (or others who do not share our faith) seem fuzzy, with no clear goals, so unlike straight evangelism where you know exactly what you're trying to accomplish? Are we afraid of screwing up or failing, and God knows we want to win, always win? Or are we scared that we might find out our neighbors are right about something when it's so much easier just to assume they're flat-out wrong?

We need to get in touch with this resistance in ourselves, brothers and sisters, address it, and by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, overcome it. For it has never been more important for Christians to come out of their ecclesial cocoons, to take off our churchy blinders, and meet the Muslim world in a different spirit. In our time, so many voices tell us we are living a "clash of civilizations", an era when the Christian or post-Christian west finds itself opposed to the Muslim East and folks on both sides of the dividing lines have internalized this metaphor, believing it to be our sad, but true reality. In the Eglise Evangelique in Morocco, we live quite literally at the crossroads between East and West: the word for Morocco in Arabic, el-Maghreb, means the west, as in the westernmost part of the Islamic world. We are Christians on this raw edge of the Muslim world, living the tensions. And yet, we are witnesses to the fact that we do not have to accept this model of warring animosity as the only way to live as Christian and Muslim. As disciples of Jesus Christ, and as those who would imitate him, we refuse, firmly and

resolutely, the categories of division this world would impose –who is an ally, who is an enemy, who’s a good guy, who’s a bad guy, who is in, who is out, who’s us, who is them. In Christ, as it was in Tyre 2000 years ago, so it is for us today: where God’s spirit moves, barriers are yet broken down, dividing lines are still crossed, stifling paradigms are ever dismantled and sent to the trash heap. Therefore we cannot look at our Muslim neighbors from our former point of view -- seeing them as infidels to target, as opponents to be vanquished, as competitors to beat. Rather, we see them now from the point of view of Christ, as neighbors to be loved.

A Franciscan priest friend of mine from Meknes, Joel Columbel, tells the story of being invited to participate in the funeral service of a Muslim neighbor. Joel asked the family members who had invited him if they truly thought it was appropriate for him to do that as a Christian priest. One of them responded without hesitating: Is a priest just for Christians, or is priest for everyone? It seems to me that this posture of being priests (a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation) not for ourselves focused inwardly on our agenda, but for everyone – open to others outside our faith in a spirit of humility, gentleness and love, invited in to bear our witness in the lives of our neighbors -- this feels key to me as part of a new paradigm for being Christian with Muslims. In Christ we have been freed to color outside the lines of this world’s categories, distinctions, partitions however they would divide us up. Hear me, sisters and brothers: It is incumbent upon us as Baptists in this Fellowship to break out of old paradigms for mission among Muslims and find new ways to be loving neighbors to Muslims in Kentucky and beyond in the world if we are to be true to the Spirit of Christ in this age. That is one thing we as your partners in Morocco believe we can help you to do, because we’ve got some experience in working out an alternative model. And so we invite you to come alongside us as we seek to follow the example of Jesus, to come and walk among Muslims with us, to listen to their longings and dreams, as well as their anger and pain, to play, to pray, to break bread together, and above all, to

hold out hope for them, for us, and for our world even as you hold out your hands and find them clasped warmly, firmly, gratefully. Who knows how the Spirit of Christ might speak to hearts – ours as well as theirs? Who knows what healing or other miraculous thing may come to be?

My hope is that as we live this partnership, learning to love our Muslim neighbors more faithfully, we will be co-witnesses to many miracles. And we will say together with them, “This is the Lord’s doing. It is marvelous in our eyes.” Thanks be to God. Alhumdulillah. Amen.