

“A Memorable Encounter”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for September 9th 2019 (16th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Mark 7: 24-30

Where to begin? Where to begin with this most memorable...and alas, most awkward of Gospel texts?

Well. For starters, I am struck by the fact—given that I am into my final two years of full-time ministry—I am struck by the fact that the United Church of Canada is part of a large group of churches that utilize a lectionary (a cycle of scripture readings) that is based on a three-year cycle, meaning...

...meaning that this may well be the last time I ever need to preach on the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman. And yes: with all due respect to Mark, Jesus and this wonderful woman, I won't be shedding any tears at the thought that I may never again have to encounter this text: at least not from the perspective of the person standing behind the pulpit! That's my first thought...

...my second thought having to do with the fact that it was impossible for me not to be reminded—over the past week—of the extent to which it can rightly be claimed that God has a delicious sense of humor. Let me explain.

As most of you will be aware, I have led the congregation—for most of the summer—through a 12-part sermon series on five of the more obscure texts in the Old Testament, the last of which—*Esther*—I have come to regard as the most thoroughly **Jewish** text in the Old Testament. And I must admit, as we entered the home-stretch of that 12-part series, convinced that we were already for a change of pace, I resolved (as soon as the series concluded) to devote subsequent Sundays...

...starting this morning and right through to the end of November...

...to basing sermons not on Old Testament texts but on New Testament texts, specifically whichever Gospel text the lectionary handed up for that particular Sunday. And so, you can imagine my astonishment when I discovered that the Gospel text on offer for this, the Sunday immediately following our laying the book *Esther* to one side, was none other than a text which, more than any other, serves as an irrefutable reminder that Jesus—however else we regard him—was indisputably a Jew. Indeed: Joseph Klausner, a renowned 20th century Jewish scholar, in his book-length study of Jesus, bitterly remarked: “If any other Jewish teacher of the time had said such a thing [as Jesus said to the Syrophenician woman], Christians would never have forgiven Judaism for it!”¹

And we shouldn't, I think, attempt to minimize the offensiveness, not only of Jesus' words but of his initial failure to act when this woman desperately approaches him, seeking cleansing and healing for her afflicted daughter. I know it is tempting to suppose that Jesus had a smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes when he initially rebuffed the woman and her request. But frankly, were I that desperate parent—in the

presence of someone whose healing gifts had become common knowledge not only among the Jewish people, but among the gentiles in regions bordering on ancient Galilee...

...were I in the presence of such a one, who not only rebuffed my appeal for help, but compared my helpless daughter to a dog, I would have a hard time noticing (let alone taking into account) whether or not the good teacher had a twinkle in his eyes.

Furthermore, as someone wrestling with this episode from the perspective of familiarity with **all** of Mark's Gospel, Jesus' response to the woman doesn't even make a whole lot of sense. Reading Mark from start to finish, we know that Jesus has already offered healing to a gentile. Moreover, even a quick skim of Mark makes it crystal clear that the Jesus of Mark's Gospel has his primary conflicts with the leadership of his own people: the Jewish people. Indeed: just prior to Mark's telling of the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, Mark depicts Christ giving a hard time to a group of Jewish opponents, in effect telling them that the Kosher laws that are one of the distinguishing marks that separate Jews from Gentiles, are mere human tradition: having no real basis in the heart and mind of God. And so, unless his goal is to make certain that he irritates Jews and Gentiles alike, it comes as quite a shock for him, without so much as a "how do you do", to go from that dismantling of one of the most characteristic of Jewish distinctives, to his declining to heal a child...

...a child!...

...in the episode immediately following, basing his decision on the child's ethnicity. You see: it's not just that this is an unsettling episode...frankly, within the context of the flow of Mark's Gospel, it sticks out like a sore thumb. For that matter, there is really nothing like this...nothing at all like this...to be found anywhere, in any of the four New Testament Gospels. Matthew, in retelling it, tones it down. Luke, not surprisingly, simply omits it. What in the world...what in the world are we to make of so unsettling an episode?

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Let me preface my answer to that question by insisting that this story, like any of the great Biblical stories, can be viewed through countless lenses and interpreted in countless ways. And certainly the first way...the first way in which it must be viewed, is through the deeply personal lens that is unavoidably part of an encounter between our Lord, and a desperate mother seeking healing for her child. On that level—understood in the most personal of ways—I think it impossible to ignore the likelihood that Jesus, on some level, was testing the faith of this woman. After all...

...after all: however we classify this story, it incorporates a healing miracle, reaching its climax with the exorcism—at a distance—of a malicious spirit. But as soon as we regard the story in that light, we need to acknowledge that Jesus—in **many** of the healing stories we find in Mark's Gospel—makes a strong connection between an act of healing, and the faith of the person who is the beneficiary of that healing. Confronted

with this gentile woman, Jesus appears to be testing her faith...doing so provocatively...doing so with an edge we may well find offensive...but, to be fair, doing so in a way that permits her to get the best of him.

And she **does** get the best of him: let's be clear on that. Jesus, in this encounter, selects a very troubling image with which to speak of this woman's daughter, explaining that the "children's food should not be given to the dogs." As offensive as that sounds to our ears, it was even more offensive in the context of ancient Near East cultures—including Jewish cultures—that tended to regard dogs, especially street dogs, with utter disdain. What the woman does, however—rather than reject the metaphor—is make the point that house-dogs (as opposed to their street-dog cousins) most definitely do get the crumbs from the table: at which point Jesus immediately hails her for her response and grants her request. By the time she gets home, the evil spirit has departed from her daughter. Whatever else we want to say about this encounter, we most certainly can and must say that it is one in which a woman not only "passes" Jesus' test, but appears to turn things on their head, serving as **his** teacher. Indeed: the very next episode...the very next episode in Mark's Gospel, shows Jesus moving further into Gentile territory, where he continues to offer a ministry of healing. In short: after a rocky start, this memorable encounter ends on a happy note.

Nor should we overlook the contrast between this episode in Mark, and the condemnation of the Kosher laws that precede it. Keep in mind that the Gospels don't provide a strict chronology of Christ's ministry. Yes, they start at the beginning: in the case of Mark, with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. And yes, they end with his death and resurrection. But in between, episodes are often grouped thematically rather than chronologically. It's of great interest, therefore, that Mark—having shown Jesus pretty much demolishing the entire Jewish system of food purity at the beginning of this sequence, immediately shows Jesus reaffirming his belief that his vocation was primarily to the Jewish people rather than to the wider Gentile world. Frankly, coming in the midst of a Gospel that appears to have been primarily addressed to Gentiles...

...coming at this point in Mark's Gospel, it is frankly an astonishing reminder—and an important reminder—that Jesus did not reject his people, although he was often in conflict with his people. That he continued to regard his core vocation in precisely that way—as a mission to his fellow Jews—is something even Mark does not attempt to disguise. And frankly, that ought to be regarded as a remarkable sign of hope **for all people**. We may—to put it bluntly—choose to turn our back on God and those God sends to us...but God does not lightly turn God's back on us. Jesus stubbornly persists in his vocation...stubbornly insists upon his Messianic calling to the Jewish people...and through his persistence in **that** calling to one particular people, is ultimately shown to be the One who has a calling, who has a vocation to **all** people.

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Permit a final thought.

You may have noticed that I have been—over the past few minutes—making heavy use of words such as vocation...words such as calling...to describe what is going on in this episode. In part, that's because this is one of those Gospel encounters that leave us no choice but to acknowledge the full humanity of Christ. To speak personally—as someone whose Christology (whose doctrine of Christ) is on the high end of the spectrum, I don't blink an eye when Nicene creed describes Jesus as fully divine: "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." Amen to that! The problem however—with far too much Christian theology—is that there has been a tendency to forget that the Nicene Creed also describes Jesus as "fully human". Sadly, in so much Christian teaching and preaching, the Jesus we present, far from being "fully human, fully divine", actually comes across as a god-dressed-up-in human flesh: in short, a god **pretending** to be a human being.

And one of the things worth noting in this memorable encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, is that it displays with full vigour...

...right up there with the story of Christ praying in Gethsemane, right up there with Christ crying out from the Cross "my God, my God why have you forsaken me?"...

...this morning's Gospel episode wonderfully serves as a reminder of the **humanity** of Christ which, if nothing else, means that he like every other human being, needed to spend time and energy coming to terms with his vocation, his mission...his calling, and then cultivating the discipline to live out his vocation, to live out his unique mission and calling with passion and dedication and, yes, with a willingness...

...with a willingness to be shown new possibilities...and new vistas...in that vocation: from the most unlikely of sources including that wonderful Syrophoenician woman. And you know...and here's the punchline!

At a time when we, here at Trinity, are beginning to enter—in fear and trembling—into a time of transition...I hope and pray that you, as a congregation, will be encouraged to think vocationally, to think missionally. Not just to fill a vacancy when I retire, not just to plug a hole, but to use that vacancy as an **opportunity**: as an opportunity to ask the vocational question...the missional question, to ask of God: where are you leading us, what mission do you have in mind for us, to what fresh challenges are you calling us here in North Nanaimo/Lantzville, as Trinity United moves into the future as a community of faith. And yes: in the asking of such questions, to be prepared to be challenged and delighted...much, I think, Christ in his humanity was astonished and delighted, with the wisdom and the boldness and the deep faith that came to him from an unexpected source, in this most memorable of encounters.

Please pray with me.

Gracious and Holy One:
O God of encounter, O God of endless surprise.
May your light shine always upon us,
to illumine, to encourage, to challenge.
Grant us clarity as to who we are,
and how we might best serve **your** mission
in the midst of a world of constant change
and frequent turmoil.
And always, grant us the faith to trust in your promise
that those who seek shall find,
those who knock will find the door opened,
that those who hunger will be fed,
and those who thirst will be quenched,
in anticipation of that day,
when your love will be all and all through all eternity.
In Jesus' name. Amen!

¹ Quoted in Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, (New York: Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 2000), p. 468.