

A Change of Perspective

Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7: 24-30
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Our perspectives can change. Sometimes all it takes for our perspectives to change is learning a missing detail. Years ago, I learned a small group discussion exercise that helps us think about how we might change our own perspectives. It begins by reading this story aloud.

A father with four children boarded a city bus near a hospital. As the bus pulled into traffic the children began misbehaving, but the father did nothing. The children's behavior became worse. Still the father did nothing. Finally, another passenger asked him to make his children sit down and behave. The father looked up with tears running down his cheeks. "I am sorry," he said. "My wife just died."

If you were the other passenger on that bus, what would you do next?



If we were doing that small group exercise, you would have a few minutes of silence before a series of discussions would begin. But this is a sermon and not a small group exercise for leaders, so we are going to switch stories from the grief-stricken father on a bus to Jesus on a mission trip to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Both Matthew and Mark include this story in their gospels; it features an event where Jesus' perspective appeared to change. If Jesus were on the bus with the grieving father, his role would be like the other passenger who asks the father to do something about his children's behavior.

Is there anyone, anywhere who wants to be treated the way Jesus treated this mother who desperately wanted her daughter healed? We begin here by

acknowledging what we feel when we read her words “Lord, help me,” answered with “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (Mt. 15: 26) Why do we want to follow this Jesus? We are shocked and forced to look deeper, to try find why Jesus may be so apparently rude. Here is some of what I learned while studying to understand that is helping me change my perspectives.

We do not know why Jesus took this trip Jesus to Tyre and Sidon. Reviewing between where we stopped last week and where we began this week, Matthew wrote about how Jesus healed the sick, discussed tradition with the Pharisees and scribes, and preached a sermon about how we are defiled by what we say more than what we eat. Suddenly Matthew wrote, “Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon.” (Mt. 15:21).

Tyre and Sidon are Mediterranean coastal cities just a few miles north of the border between Israel and Lebanonⁱ. They are port cities on the ancient Silk Road, and the shell of a mollusk that grows in the sea there was ground to produce a rare purple dye, the color of kings. When Jesus went there, Tyre and Sidon were joined as a major port for the Roman Empire. Archeologists find Tyre and Sidon to be a challenge to excavate because humans have lived there continuously through recorded history (Genesis 10) and still do. One difference in Mark’s gospel is that Jesus and this woman are in a private home, logically a local synagogue gathering. (Mark 7: 24-30)

Could it be that Jesus went to Tyre and Sido to visit synagogues just as he went to visit other synagogues in Galilee? Could it be that this woman heard the miracle working rabbi from Nazareth had arrived and decided to ask him to cure her daughter? She was the polar opposite of a Pharisee. She was a Canaanite, not a Jew. She was a woman, not a man. By seeking Jesus and speaking up, she violated all kinds of social norms. As a Canaanite woman, maybe she did not know women were only allowed to observe but never speak when a synagogue gathered.

The first time she spoke, Jesus said nothing, but he did allow her to stay when the disciples said she should be removed. Jesus stayed true to his missionⁱⁱ in a difficult situation. I have not learned why Jesus compared Canaanites to dogs, but most human cultures agree that it is terribly wrong to give the family dog the children’s food. What we know is that her words changed Jesus’ perspective; “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” (Mt. 15: 27) What person who has ever lived with a family dog does not know the truth of that!

As I imagine Jesus hearing her rebuttal, I see him smile and then answer, “Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish.” (Mt. 15:28) It was no

longer about her ancestry and gender, the words she spoke revealed her faith. Therefore, her Lord made her daughter well.

In that moment of changed perspective, Jesus' mission, "... to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," (Luke 4: 18-22) expanded to include his purpose, "... that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17 CEB) A Canaanite girl was healed and returned to community because her mother's faith in her Lord made it so.

This all happened in the port region of Tyre and Sidon, a port from which Paul sailed to preach the good news of salvation to the world. One must wonder if the mother and Paul knew each other. My educated guess that they did because of the gentiles included in the plot of Matthew's gospel.

While Paul made mission trips, Matthew wrote his gospel as more Gentiles were becoming Christians, about 40 years after this event in Tyre and Sidon happened. From his deep knowledge of Jesus' life, Matthew included believers who were not Jews all through his gospel. First came the Magi who brought baby Jesus gifts after seeing his birth star. (Matthew 2: 1-12) Then Jesus healed a Roman centurion's servant with a word. (Matthew 8: 5-13) Next, near a Gentile cemetery Jesus exorcized two people of their demons. (Matthew 8: 28-34) Finally, Jesus healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon. These Gentiles in Matthew's gospel all believed Jesus was sent by God and experienced miracles because of their faith. In their stories, Jesus Christ himself fulfilled his commission for the church, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I will be with you every day until the end of this present age." (Matthew 28:19,20a)

Suddenly I wonder if Jesus was rude, or if he was teaching as a Jewish rabbi by using a provocative question on purpose. We do hope his question had a noble purpose. We now can see that Jesus knew only faith could make a mother bold enough to kneel before him publicly and say, "Lord, help me." (Mt. 15:27) Perhaps Jesus did not change his perspective, but knew how to make his followers change theirs. I wonder what they did next.

Again, Matthew does not tell us. His purpose for writing is to help us know Christ and become more like him. Perhaps Matthew quoted Jesus sounding rude to provoke our hearts to a change of perspective. After all, when we hear/read about this Canaanite mother's faith, Jesus immediately healed her daughter with a word. How then should we treat those unlike us who pray for the Lord's compassion?

Unlike Matthew's gospel, the story I opened this sermon with is not factual. It is a story written for teaching purposes. All the characters—father, children, and the other passenger—are in a paragraph long opening for story without an end, written specifically to be finished by a classroom full of learners. After hearing the story, each learner first thinks in silence for five minutes. Then they turn to a partner and combine their responses. The partners then become small groups of four to six people, and finally the large group reconvenes. The outcomes are many, but every outcome is grounded in compassion.

That leaning exercise and this sermon share the same goal: to provoke us all to consider is that when these things happen in our lives, we will have considered how to respond to what we do not understand with compassion. Will we then be more like Christ? Well, that is a history we are all still creating.

Amen.

ⁱ Tyre and Sidon are named together in the Bible 64 times. Sidon is first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 10, the genealogy of Noah's descendants up to the time when humans built the tower of Babel. It was founded by Noah's great grandson, Sidon. Sidon's father was Canaan, the father of the Canaanites. (Genesis 10: 6-20) Tyre is first mentioned in the Bible when the Israelites were led by Moses and Joshua to the Promised Land. (See Exodus 23:31 for the boundaries of the Promised Land, and Joshua 19:29 where Tyre is first named.)

ⁱⁱ Luke 4:18-22. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. . . . Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it." (Common English Bible/CEB)