

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18, Year B)  
September 5, 2021  
Trinity Capitol Square  
Stephen H. Applegate

+In the Name of God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged [Jesus] to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Mark 7:26-28

Those of you who have been attending church since I started here at Trinity may have wondered, “does this guy ever preach on the Gospel lesson? All he ever seems to talk about is the Old Testament!” The answer is, “of course I preach on the Gospels,” and I’m going to do that very thing this morning!

Today’s Gospel from Mark contains two stories – the story of the miraculous healing of a little girl in the region of Tyre and the story of the healing of a deaf man in the region of the Decapolis. Although each story is worthy of a sermon, I want to focus our attention on the first story. And I want to begin by reviewing the events that led up to what is most certainly a very difficult exchange between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, the woman who is the mother of a very sick little girl.

Before he arrived in the region of Tyre, Jesus had been conducting his mission in Galilee among his own people – the Jews. He left Galilee – the place where he had grown up and where he had started his public ministry – and headed west to the Mediterranean coast – to what is now Lebanon. Jesus was trying to hide. Mark tells us that he “did not want anyone to know he was there.” He was trying to escape, to get some rest, and to have some respite from the demands of ministry.

Jesus’ ministry had not been going all that well recently. In the Gospel passages we’ve read during the past several weeks, we’ve heard story after story about how Jesus was attacked by the scribes and the Pharisees for his words and his actions. And then there’s the fact that, even though Jesus had attracted large crowds at the start of his ministry, a lot of the early disciples were leaving the movement. People were no longer following him in droves.

In some cases, Jesus had offended the early disciples by something he’d said. In other cases, the disciples took Jesus at his word when he told them that they faced significant sacrifices if they followed with him. To hear him say, “if you want to be my disciple, you must take up the cross and follow me,” must have scared off many of them. They decided that the cost of discipleship was too high a price to pay, and they went looking for someone else to follow who would demand less of them instead.

So, Jesus needed a break. He left all these conflicts and failures behind him and went away to what he thought was going to be a safe house in a foreign country where no one would bother him. Mark isn’t the kind of Gospel writer who spends time psychoanalyzing Jesus, but we can imagine Jesus taking his time to reflect on recent events, mulling things over, and looking for ways to rebuild his own emotional and spiritual resources before undertaking the next phase of his ministry. Jesus knew that the next phase involved a big push – a push that will ultimately end in Jerusalem where conflicts with the religious and political authorities would result in his crucifixion and death.

Mark writes, however, that in spite of Jesus' best efforts to go off the grid, he "could not escape notice." Word traveled fast even without social media, and word of Jesus' healing powers evidently reached all the way from Nazareth and Capernaum to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Syrophenician woman, whose daughter was terribly sick – Mark says that she had "an unclean demon" – found out where Jesus was staying. She came and bowed down at his feet and implored Jesus to help her. "Please cast the demon out. Save my daughter. Please, please save my daughter." It's impossible not to be moved by her plight. Like any parent in her situation, this mother was ready to do anything to find help for her child – even begging for help from an itinerant rabbi who had unexpectedly rented a place down the street from her and had moved in.

Jesus' response to her was surprisingly harsh. Here's what Jesus said to the sick child's mother, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Here's what he meant: "Stand in line and take your turn. The children – meaning my own people, the Jews – get fed first. If there's any left over, the dogs – meaning people like you Gentiles – can have some." Let that sink in for a moment. It was an awful thing to say – Jesus called the woman a dog – a grave insult even now in the Middle East.

Now granted, other Jews called Gentiles, "dogs," and Gentiles called Jews, "dogs," and they called each other all kinds of names besides during the time of Jesus. It wasn't right and isn't right, but that was the state of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles at the time. Needless to say, the problem isn't limited to the ways Jews and Gentiles treated each other back in the first century.

But the issue in today's reading is that we are talking about Jesus, because he's the one who called the woman a dog. To have Jesus call this woman a dog is as shocking as it would be to have someone like Pope Francis talk about immigrants and refugees the way the most ardent nativists in this country talk about them. You know the slogans, "Mexicans are rapists. Muslims are terrorists." And you know the angry rhetoric that tells fellow American citizens to "go back where you came from."

What are we to make of our story story? What can we learn from it?

It's always helpful when dealing with a difficult Bible passage like this one to see what the commentaries have to say about it. In the case of this story from Mark's Gospel, the commentaries are divided between two different ways to understand this interaction between Jesus and the woman with the sick daughter. The first way is this: Jesus and the woman were just fooling around. As one scholar put it, "The tone of voice throughout, though urgent . . . is nevertheless that of teasing banter." This way of interpreting what is going on in the story says, "yes, this is a serious matter, but Jesus and the Syrophenician woman were just playing games with one another."

The other interpretation of the passage goes along these lines: Jesus got it all wrong at first. He did call the woman and her daughter, "dogs." But when the Syrophenician woman responded to his insult the way she did, Jesus learned from the woman's response and grew to have a new perspective.

I remember leading a weekday Bible study class years ago when I was on the staff at the cathedral in Buffalo. We were wrestling with this exact passage. I got into an argument with a member of the group about whether Jesus was capable of growing, learning, and changing his perspective. I said Jesus not only could but did learn throughout his life and ministry. The person I was arguing with said that Jesus was omniscient since he was the Son of God, and, therefore, he did not learn or grow because he did not need to. I told her that I was pretty sure she was guilty of some heresy. I think I said it she was guilty of Apollinarianism, a heresy that declared Jesus had a normal human body but a divine mind instead of a regular human soul. I hurled a few anathemas at her, because that's what you do when faced with a heretic, but I doubt that her mind was changed.

I prefer the second way of understanding today's Gospel – that Jesus learned and grew – that he learned and grew just as the rest of us do – or, at least, just as the rest of us are *capable* of doing. Why does this matter? What difference does this make? For me, believing that human beings can learn and grow makes it possible to have hope for the future of humankind. Not to believe that human beings are capable of learning and growing is to give into cynicism and pessimism. It is to assume that we human beings are stuck in a permanent state of prejudice and bigotry, imprisoned by narrow-mindedness and ignorance – with no hope of escape from such attitudes or from the horrifying litany of the actions that result from bias and intolerance.

I don't know where Jesus got the idea that Gentiles were dogs. My guess is that he picked it up by osmosis while he was growing up in Nazareth, just as our own attitudes develop from our exposure to the influential people in our own lives – our families, teachers, coaches, and political leaders. Believing that Gentiles were inferior was an inherited cultural norm. Certainly, as we have already noted, the Jews believed that there was a great separation between themselves and the Gentiles – a separation that was, for all intents and purposes, unbridgeable. It didn't help that the Jews were living in a land occupied by Gentile soldiers and ruled by Gentile laws.

But the fact is that wherever Jesus got the idea, it's an understanding that gets repeated over and over again wherever there are racial, or ethnic, or religious differences among people. Some of us are old enough to remember Tom Lehrer, who used to write brilliant satirical songs in the 50's and 60's. He had a song called "National Brotherhood Week" that made fun of the all the ways we avoid the real and hard work of reconciliation by saying "let's just all get along." You can still watch him sing the song on YouTube if you want to.

Included in video are the song's lyrics, which are definitely not PC – lyrics that contain painful verses like these: "Oh the white folks hate the black folks,/And the black folks hate the right folks/To hate all but the right folks/Is an old established rule . . . . Oh, the Protestants hate the Catholics,/And the Catholics hate the Protestants,/And the Hindus hate the Moslems,/And everybody hates the Jews." Although Lehrer originally performed the song in the early 1960's in a country where the KKK was lynching people, it's still a lacerating piece of musical satire all these years later – painful to listen to because it still describes pervasively held attitudes. Despite significance progress that's been made over the last 60 years, there's still a lot of work that remains to be done – so much, in fact, that it's hard to know where to start sometimes.

One place where we all might begin is by examining whether we have effectively segregated ourselves from interactions with people who are different from us – whose race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, or political party is different from our own. As a society we are increasingly siloed – separated from one another by where we live, or by whom we spend time with, or by what we read, or by the media we consume. It takes effort and commitment to listen to other viewpoints, to read something written by someone who challenges our pre-suppositions. We must be intentional about it, although sometimes providence acts to overcome our isolation from one another in remarkable ways.

Jesus went off to a different place – away from his own people – hoping that he might catch a break from all that was weighing him down. Little did he expect to meet someone who would challenge his understanding of how Jews and Gentiles related to one another. The story of his encounter with the Syrophenician woman ends with the healing of her daughter. Mark writes that the woman "went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."

My guess is that the child's healing was not the only healing that happened that day. I think Jesus experienced a sort of healing himself. As evidence, I think of one of the stories he told later on in his ministry about how, when a man had fallen among thieves on the road to Jericho and left for dead, it was a Samaritan, not a Jew, who saved his life.

May Jesus cast out the demons of prejudice in every one of us and heal the divisions that continued to plague our society and our world. Amen.