

“Reluctantly Healed”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 7: 24-37

This is very painful to admit, but I believe confession is good for the soul. Here it goes: I have gotten addicted to a television show which was my wife’s idea.

The show is “Downton Abbey.” It’s a British show which is shown on PBS here in the United States. It’s also a drama/soap opera kind of show – ugh, that hurts to say – but it’s gotten me hooked, to be sure.

The show is set in England during the 1910’s and ‘20’s, and centers on the lives of the Grantham family, who live on the Downton estate. The head of the family is Lord Grantham, and the plot centers on all the varied exploits of the rest of his family. There are lots of British accents and witty comments, and as someone who loves British culture and history, I think I know why I got sucked into this show.

A dynamic of the show which is fascinating is the collection of staff who serve the residents of Downton. There are twice as many servants as there are members of the Grantham family – butlers, footmen, maids, cooks, chauffeurs and more. The show does an excellent job of showing the specific tasks and responsibilities these servants had in that era. It also reminds me of how crazy some of those tasks truly were: brushing the ladies’ hair, dressing the men, brushing off their coats, and so on. As an adult man, I couldn’t imagine someone “dressing” me each day!

But the other thing the show does very well is illustrate the boundaries which were present between these classes of people. The servants always speak to the family with “my lord” or “my lady,” and their daily schedule is completely determined by the wants and needs of the family. When you witness the aristocracy order the servants here and there, it initially feels offensive and subhuman. But as you watch the show, you begin to realize that it is simply how life was “ordered” in that era, and for better or worse, each person played the role they were given.

And yet, those roles are totally formed by humans. It solely has to do with what class you were born into, not anything you earned or made of yourself. Two women or two men who were born at the same time could lead two totally different lives, entirely because of the class they were born into. Those differences were formed not by God, but by human judgments, prejudices, cultural norms, and history. The show has reminded me about how easy it is for us as human creatures to make distinctions between one another not on actual differences, but on perceived, manufactured differences.

The world of “Downton Abbey” is very foreign to us in 21st-century America. I don’t believe any of you have a group of servants in your home who dress you each day! But that does not mean we are immune to class separation. We look at the man standing at the intersection asking for money, and we thank God we are not like him. We witness a family struggling with English while asking for directions, and we chastise them for not knowing “our language.” We may not live in a country estate with servants all around us, but we are still very adept at enforcing boundaries which have been erected between us as God’s children.

In the two healing stories we have read from Mark today, we witness God breaking through the established barriers which existed between peoples in order to provide grace and health. And in so doing, we realize that ultimately we are made whole ourselves when we allow the God of grace to heal our hardened hearts with peace and love.

The first thing to be aware of in these stories from Mark is where they take place. We read that Jesus “went away to the region of Tyre” when he healed the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter, and he went “towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis” when he healed the deaf man. Both of these occur in areas which were primarily Gentile territories. While there would have been some Jewish people in the area, they were in the minority for sure. In essence, Jesus has left the safety of Galilee to venture into these less-Jewish lands. Was it to escape the notoriety and crowds? That is inferred by verse 24: “He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.” Whatever the reason, the miracles he performs do not just restore wholeness, but they cross over cultural boundaries between Jew and Gentile believers.

And yet the first healing almost never takes place, does it? Perhaps the most troubling aspect of this entire passage is how Jesus responds to the Syrophoenician woman. She is desperate. Her daughter is besieged by an unclean spirit, and when she hears Jesus is in town, she is determined to speak to the man whom she has heard has remarkable healing powers. She barges into the house where he didn’t want anyone to know he was, and bows down at Jesus’ feet, begging him to cast out the demon from 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’” (7:27). That hurts, doesn’t it? You hurt for the woman and her daughter, who are compared to dogs. You hurt that these words come from Jesus, the one we call Lord and Savior. Why would he say such a thing? Was he having a bad day? Was he tired and exhausted and full of compassion fatigue? Did his human side take over his divine side so fully and completely at that moment? It’s a very painful moment for all, indeed.

I almost wonder if God intervened at this point, and spoke through the Syrophoenician woman. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (6:28). It’s as if it wakes Jesus up and reminds him that despite his

exhaustion, grace still has a role to play. It did not matter that she was not Jewish; it mattered that she was a child of God. Hence, he responds with action: “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter” (7:29).

Amy Howe writes: *The story that follows the tale of the Syrophoenician woman is also a story about healing. A deaf man with a speech impediment is brought before Jesus. Jesus sees beyond this man’s infirmity. He sees his value as a child of God. Jesus takes the man away from the crowd and puts his fingers in his ears, then spits and touches the man’s tongue. Raising his eyes to heaven, Jesus says, “Be opened” (vv.33-34). Whenever Jesus heals, whether it is a demon-possessed girl, a man with leprosy, a bleeding woman, or a deaf man, he heals not only the body but the fracture with the community as well.*

The Syrophoenician woman called Jesus to a mission of infinite compassion and mercy. Mitzi Minor writes that Mark gives us God’s initiatives in these stories. Jesus’ actions illustrated that a “worthless, Gentile girl whose mind was devoured by a demon” and a “good for nothing deaf man who couldn’t even speak clearly” were indeed children of God to be embraced and valued. Humanity’s authentic response to God’s initiative “calls forth recognition that there are no external barriers between God and any human being: not race, class, ethnicity, gender, age, or physical condition. Consequently, there should also be no such barriers between human beings.”

Status is a product of our own imagination, invisible to God. Once we acknowledge that there are no walls separating us, love and mercy flow unfettered, and all people are deemed equally valuable (Amy C. Howe, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 46-48).

As I think about it, I’ve also become so enamored with “Downton Abbey” because within the class separation, there are moments which show that the characters realize these distinctions are truly human-made. It is the butler who counsels the eldest daughter when she is torn about her life’s direction. It is in the crisis of the First World War that class distinction is eliminated, as the estate is turned into a rehabilitation facility for wounded soldiers. It is small moments between servant and family which show cracks in the armor of separation, and you begin to see within the characters that the distinctions between them are tenuous at best.

Jesus may have reluctantly healed the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter, but he healed her nonetheless. We may reluctantly take steps to bridge what divides us, but when we step out in faith to heal broken relationships, God is there with us. As baptized children of God, we are given the courage to step out of our comfort zone and welcome the stranger, comfort the bereaved, and uplift the poor. As witnesses to God’s transformative grace, may we, like the crowds, zealously proclaim the miracles we witness in our lives of faith.

Thanks be to God for the faith of the woman, the courage of the lame man’s friends, and the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.