

The Rev. Anne Largent Smith  
Sermon preached at St. Mary's Episcopal Church Elk Grove (Sacramento, California)  
September 9, 2015  
Proper 18B: James 2:1-17, Mark 7:24-37

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Poking around on the internet this week as I often do when I prepare to preach, I found that many others noticed what I did on looking into the gospel of Mark this week: Jesus's humanity is showing.

For one thing, Jesus seems tired. His ministry up to this point has involved a lot of roaming around Galilee and the surrounding environs talking to people and healing them. People have come in close, thick crowds to be healed. Jesus has been having a hard time getting any solitude, any quiet time in which to recuperate. Everywhere he goes, it seems, the crowd soon catches up with him. Maybe he's tired.

Jesus may also be frustrated. He has told people to keep quiet about the healing they've received, but they have instead spread the news. He has encountered demons who cry out that he is the Messiah before he can tell them to be quiet, too. He's been criticized by the Pharisees for things like not washing his hands. He's been asked to leave by people who are afraid of his power. And he's been pursued by his own family, who seem intent on stopping him. He's running into a lot of uncooperative people.

And then there's the question of whether his message is landing with people. In his hometown he offers his message of salvation, and the people all wonder where this local boy thinks he came from. On the hillside when he miraculously feeds thousands, people only see him as a source of bread and fish, rather than as the giver of eternal life. Even his disciples puzzle over his words, fear him when he walks on the water, and cannot make sense of what he is doing right in front of their eyes.

No, no one said being the Messiah would be easy. But maybe no one thought it would be this hard. In the Gospel of John it doesn't seem this hard. In the Gospel of John, Jesus seems to know from day one that he is, as we say in the creed, of one being with the Father. And we who believe that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine may have an easier time accepting the premise that Jesus is very God from very God, and have a harder time accepting that Jesus was human. I mean, the Creed also says that—in the form of the Creed we'll use at 10:00 today, it says

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.

But in our minds we put a little asterisk after that phrase sometimes. Jesus was truly human—except that he was the best human. Jesus was perfect. Jesus never sinned.

Right?

It says so in the Bible, doesn't it? Hebrews 4:15: For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Fair enough, Bible. Fair enough. But as I've spent time with the Gospel of Mark this week, I've found myself challenged to let go of my ideas of what Jesus's sinlessness and his oneness with God mean. Because I think I've been picturing a Jesus who never got tired, who never was cross with anyone, who always knew what to say and was in control of every situation. And while that may be a way to take his divinity seriously, it fails to take into account his humanity.

I've been willing to admit that Jesus was probably tired sometimes, and hungry, and even mad. These seem like human things—although as far as anger goes, the Bible reports that God feels that way sometimes too.

But what about the part of being human where we learn? What about the part of being human where we develop, and gain wisdom and insight? Or the parts where we find out what we thought was true wasn't, and we and our beliefs change? Where we realize we've been complicit in a system whose fundamental assumptions are incorrect, and we have to change them? Those parts of being human are experiences I haven't imagined Jesus having.

Until recently. Until I read again this story about Jesus trying to get away where no one could find him, and being accosted by a Gentile woman with a sick little girl. This is a story that is ripe for misreading; a story onto which it's easy to project our own logic for responding to such a request as this Gentile woman brings. I think as much as we want to find a way to understand Jesus's behavior that puts him in a favorable light, this episode may always be uncomfortable for us. Because he really is not gracious with her. He does not exhibit divine patience and compassion. As much as I don't like it, his response to her just does not seem loving.

When Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he is unmistakably calling her—and all Gentiles by extension—dogs. It's the kind of thing any of us might say unthinkingly, especially when we're tired, and frustrated, and feeling misunderstood. It's the kind of thing any of us might say when we haven't quite caught on to how generous God is calling us to be in this world. It's the kind of thing we'd say when it's what everyone we know has always said. We might say, it's the kind of response a human might make.

In our Tuesday book group this week we spent some time talking about a passage from the writings of the great Episcopal laywoman and theologian Verna J. Dozier. Talking about how we Christians are always called to serve God without knowing all the details, Dozier writes, "I will live by the best I can discern today. Tomorrow I may find out I was wrong. Since I do not live by being right, I am not destroyed by being wrong."<sup>i</sup>

Wasn't I surprised to realize that Jesus may have done just the same. Jesus lived by the best he could discern every day—and he certainly seems to have sought wisdom in prayer regularly and frequently. But maybe there were days when Jesus found out that he'd been wrong, and something new came to light, and so he learned, and changed, and grew. This day in the story of the Gospel of Mark may have been one of those days.

Jesus's initial response to the Syrophenician woman suggests that until now, he understood his ministry to be for the Jews and the Jews alone. People like him. These are the children who need to be fed, and until now Jesus hasn't quite grasped that God's salvation is for all people, Gentile and Jew, women and men, and even little foreign girls who interrupt his vacation. But with this woman's response, Jesus is opened to a world of possibility.

Thank God for that. What I initially took to be bad news, or at least embarrassing news, turns out to offer good news. Jesus, who shows us the way, shows us that being human is part of this journey of discipleship too. Jesus shows us how to listen, and be opened to new possibilities, and learn to love. Jesus shows us what to do when we find out we were wrong. Jesus shows us what it looks like when we discover we've denied the goodness in each other and in the world God has created. Jesus shows us what repentance looks like as he turns from his initial response and again aligns himself with God's will.

There's more good news here, too. This Syrophoenician woman reminds me of the story of Jacob in the Hebrew scriptures, when he wrestles with the angel at the ford of the Jabbok River. The angel wants Jacob to let him go, and even strikes an unfair blow to his hip to put it out of joint. But Jacob hangs on, saying, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." The Syrophoenician woman says the same, in effect, to Jesus. She knows he is powerful to heal her daughter. She will not let him go. Jesus even strikes a mean blow by calling her and her daughter dogs—and still she persists. She is so confident in the abundance of God's grace that she insists upon it, so that finally Jesus himself can see how wide-reaching God's plan of salvation is. And her insistence upon that grace brings healing into her daughter's life, and possibly into hers, and to Jesus's too.

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This week we Episcopalians have been asked to participate in a day set aside to confess, repent, and end racism. Following the examples of Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman, we are invited to be opened—to open our eyes to the ways we ourselves may have acted in prejudice against others based on skin color or other characteristics, to open our eyes to God's vision for the world in which we are vessels of grace and healing in the lives of our brothers and sisters.

We received a letter from the presidents of the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops of the General Convention of the Church, the governing body of the Episcopal Church. Here is what the letter says:

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

On June 17, nine members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, were murdered by a white racist during their weekly bible study. Just a few days later at General Convention in Salt Lake City, we committed ourselves to stand in solidarity with the AME Church as they respond with acts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice (Resolution A302).

Now our sisters and brothers in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church have asked us to make that solidarity visible by participating in "Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism Sunday" on Sunday, September 6. We ask all Episcopal congregations to join this ecumenical effort with prayer and action.

"Racism will not end with the passage of legislation alone; it will also require a change of heart and thinking," writes AME Bishop Reginald T. Jackson. "This is an effort which the faith community must lead, and be the conscience of the nation. We will call upon every church, temple, mosque and faith communion to make their worship service on this Sunday a time to confess and repent for the sin and evil of racism, this includes ignoring, tolerating and accepting racism, and to make a commitment to end racism by the example of our lives and actions."

The Episcopal Church, along with many ecumenical partners, will stand in solidarity with the AME Church this week in Washington D.C. at the "Liberty and Justice for All" event, which includes worship at Wesley AME Zion Church and various advocacy events.

Racial reconciliation through prayer, teaching, engagement and action is a top priority of the Episcopal Church in the upcoming triennium. Participating in "Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism Sunday" on September 6 is just one way that we Episcopalians can undertake this essential work. Our history as a church includes atrocities for which we must repent, saints who show us the way toward the realm of God, and structures that bear witness to unjust centuries of the evils of white privilege, systemic racism, and oppression that are not yet consigned to history. We are grateful for the companionship of the AME Church and other partners as we wrestle with our need to repent and be reconciled to one another and to the communities we serve.

"The Church understands and affirms that the call to pray and act for racial reconciliation is integral to our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to our living into the demands of our Baptismal Covenant," reads Resolution C019 of the 78th General Convention. May God bless us and forgive us as we pray and act with our partners this week and in the years to come. In the words of the prophet Isaiah appointed for Sunday, may we see the day when "waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water."

Faithfully,

The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori  
Presiding Bishop and Primate of The Episcopal Church

The Rev. Gay Clark Jennings  
President, House of Deputies of The Episcopal Church

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Therefore, let us pray.

Almighty God, who created us in your image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations.

O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth: deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you.

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Michael B. Curry, *Crazy Christians: A Call to Follow Jesus* (New York: Morehouse, 2013) p. 70-71.