



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Be Opened_ - The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost- 9_5_2021

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

So if you did a bit of a double-take while listening to that gospel lesson, let me begin by saying yes, you heard that right. A mother desperately worried about her sick daughter comes to Jesus, bows down, and begs him to save her little girl. And Jesus calls her a dog, which by the way, was the ethnic slur of the day. So what has happened to our loving, liberating, and life-giving Jesus?

This is particularly a head-scratcher if you remember last week, where in the reading, just before this one the Pharisees had been asking why His followers don't follow in the tradition of washing hands before meals. And Jesus turns it into this big teachable moment, explaining that evil and sin, pride and prejudice, they're not things that you can wash off. They're not things on the outside, rather they come from within, they come from the most broken and most closed off parts of the human heart.

So what happened here? Is this the story of a fully human Jesus getting caught up in an all-too-human predicament of do as I say, not as I do? Maybe. Maybe. Mark's portrayal of Jesus is known after all for being gritty and grounded and offering a very human version of Jesus. And as we saw last week, his Jesus has no problem getting triggered from time to time. He occasionally flies off the handle.

Or maybe Jesus is just in desperate need of a vacation because immediately after last week's argument with the Pharisees we read today, He's gone up north, right? He's gone up to the region of Tyre, way north of Galilee. Into a region that is predominantly Gentile, where we are told He specifically is hoping nobody will recognize Him.

And who could blame Him? By this point in Mark's gospel, He's ministered to countless people. He's fed the 5,000 and everywhere He goes, we are told people, bring their sick and their suffering to Him. Perhaps Jesus is having a small case of what the Atlantic recently described as empathy fatigue. The feeling of being overwhelmed by the constant news of COVID deaths and breakthrough cases, earthquakes and fires, looming variants, racial injustice persisting, climate change, panic, war, and refugees. And the list goes on and on. Could Jesus perhaps be suffering from a case of empathy fatigue in this

moment when he gets a bit short with the Syrophoenician woman? Maybe. Maybe.

Preachers often try to soften the story in another direction by suggesting that Jesus isn't really insulting her at all, He's actually just testing her faith. Okay. But to me that actually makes Jesus even worse because now He's deliberately humiliating her, which seems like a cruel test to me. Not only that, but it kind of flattens the story a bit. It reduces it to a rather simple transactional kind of faith, doesn't it? If you persist and you don't give up, then you get what you want. Really? Is that how it works?

Now, I'd rather suggest that rather than being a story about Jesus, having an off day, or about her need to pass a test, I think it is far more interesting and far more challenging when we allow this to be a story about her winning an argument. Rather than spend our time trying to make excuses for Jesus, I think the story really comes to life when we let the Syrophoenician woman be the hero. She is after all the only woman in the entire Gospel of Mark that we hear actually speaking to Jesus, perhaps Mark is intentionally giving her the spotlight here because she's serving in a much bigger role, one that challenges to change us.

Notice how she takes the high ground after Jesus tells her no while adding insult to injury. She doesn't get triggered. She doesn't get defensive. She doesn't return tit for tat and she doesn't turn away either. She doesn't pick up and leave and kick herself for ever thinking that she could find common ground from this stranger from such a strange land.

She's not a theologian looking to convince Jesus that he needs to expand the scope of His mission. She's not a wealthy person of privilege asking to be bumped up in the pecking order. No, she's just a mother whose name we never learn. She doesn't know about religious hierarchies and she probably doesn't care. She doesn't even take issue with the insult that was levied against her, does she? No, she's just a mother determined to save her daughter and to not take no for an answer.

And so driven by love, driven by desperation and in the tradition of the great prophets of old, she finds the courage to turn the tables and speak truth to power. Yes, she says, call me a dog, whatever you say, I get it. I'm not part of your tribe. So call me what you want. Call me what you will. I just need you to heal my baby girl. And even if all you can spare is just a crumb of your love, well, I know, I know that coming from you, that's all she'll need.

And somehow in the love for her daughter in her insistence to be seen and to be heard in her humility and in her hope and in her courage and in her faith, somehow in all of that coming together, she offers Jesus an overwhelming witness to her own humanity. One that no cultural or socio religious prejudices

could ever withstand. And one that no heart could ever resist. Maybe, maybe this is the story about how we are all called to be such prophetic voices. How we are all called to stand up for the equal dignity and the full humanity of ourselves and for the powerless and those with no voice in our midst.

And maybe this is also a story for all of us when we are in the "in" crowd. When we find ourselves in the positions of power and privilege. Perhaps it's a lesson for us to follow in Jesus' example of humility and to be ready to be disarmed, to be ready to put down our assumptions and our judgments, to be ready to let go all of our tribal loyalties and our political and our cultural prejudices and allow the Holy Spirit to open our hearts so that we too can hear what the voiceless are trying to say and to learn what only they can teach about the need to draw the circle of love ever wider.

And finally, perhaps this is the story of a divine dance. One that can only happen when the powerful and the powerless, when the "in" group and the "out" group take one another's hand and come together as beloved children of God, and together begin to chart a new course toward a world that looks so much more like the kingdom of God.

This encounter certainly changed the course of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark, because right after this meeting, He heads even further north and encounters another Gentile who is now, coincidentally, both deaf and mute. And this time without question, He heals him. And in so doing, He makes a plea that is both a prayer, or perhaps a summary of what he has just learned that the kingdom of God breaks in when we are open.

After this encounter, Jesus goes on to feed 4,000 Gentiles and He never looks back. His mission and the gospel are now unequivocally open to all, available to all, and all because of a mother's love for her child that changed the course of history. The Syrophenician woman, I think, needs to be the hero of today's story because she is still with us today in every generation. Because she's the Palestinian mother waiting endlessly at a checkpoint to get her child to a doctor. She's the undocumented house cleaner fearful of taking her kids to an emergency room. She's an Afghan refugee worried about the world her daughter is going to grow up in if they can't find asylum.

She's the woman from that other political party, you know, the one that's destroying the world, whoever that is for you, who's worried about her son at school, because he's being relentlessly bullied. She's the African American mother who tosses and turns at night because she's praying that her teenage son comes home safe. She's the homeless mother dropping her kids off at school in the car that they are living out of, wondering where she's going to park that night.

They are the modern day prophets. Each of them pleading with us in different ways to be seen and heard so that their children might be saved and they are inviting us to join them in that divine dance that can forever change how we see one another and can even change the course of history.

Church historian Barry Vaughn tells the story of one such modern day Syrophoenician woman who did exactly that. Think back to the '90s for a moment in the waning days of the Soviet Union. Do you remember when the communist hardliners attempted a coup to stop the openness under Gorbachev? I remember in college watching on CNN as Boris Yeltsin literally stood up to the tanks that had been sent to disperse the reformers. And when he had been asked, what gave you the courage to stand down Soviet tanks, Yeltsin said that he was inspired by Lech Walesa whose solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s had also stood up to communist oppression.

And when Lech Walesa was asked, what inspired you? He said that he had long admired Dr. Martin Luther King in his non-violent civil rights movement. And when Dr. King was asked, who inspired him, he pointed to a lone Syrophoenician woman who while riding home on the bus after a long day at work was arrested for refusing to give up her seat for a white person.

And like some of the efforts I mentioned earlier about attempts to soften this gospel over the years in her autobiography, Rosa Parks pushes back against any effort by historians to soften her story. She says, people always say that I didn't give up my seat that night because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically. No more tired than I was at the end of any working day. And nor was I old, some people have this image of me of being old then. I was only 42. No, the only tired I was was tired of giving in. Like all Syrophoenician women, she too was tired of being seen as anything other than a beloved child of God.

And her persistence helped turn the wheels of justice, both here and abroad, and they are still turning. They are all around us when we have the eyes to see. Each one of them, in their own way, offering us an invitation to the divine dance and a chance to change the course of history once more.

Will we be open?

Amen.