

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23  
Mark 7:24-37

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 6, 2009

## Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges

<sup>26</sup>Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

<sup>27</sup>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."  
(Mark 7:26-27)

Watching the evening news a few weeks back I was struck by a scene in which an American woman reporter, her head hooded in a burkha, spoke from an open vehicle as it made the treacherous passage through the Khyber Pass, that notorious mountain passage that links northwest Pakistan with Afghanistan and which is a vital pipeline to supply troops and the Afghan nation. She was making the point that foreigners, let alone women in that conservative Islamic culture, were typically forbidden to travel through the pass.

It struck me initially as odd because I instantly imagined that surely we Westerners can go anywhere, can't we? Well, no. I remembered our trip to China in 2007, and how there were many rural areas that we could not travel freely, and non-sanctioned church groups with whom we could not associate—legally, anyhow.

Which got me to thinking, in the context of our story from Mark, about the social barriers we've constructed and how slow we are to tear down and replace with bridges of more equivalent relationship. Sometimes old experiences cling like limpets to later stereotypes. I'll never forget thirty years ago turning east instead of west off 285 in DC, onto east Pennsylvania Avenue (a long way from the White House, and being chased by very angry pack of young men who looked like they wanted to kill me. I was very scared.

Young children are refreshingly unbiased; watch them play together in nursery or pre-school, and they seem oblivious to the distinctions we might make. We typically devise cultural limits when we see Indian, Hispanic, Korean, black, white, Native American, federal judge candidate, janitor, Harvard professor, President, fast food server, police officer, senator, being too young, being too old! We have our private lists of who fits what role. A candidate for pastor at a Presbyterian church sat with the Pastor Nominating Committee. The Chairperson said, "We want to thank you for the time you've given us, and the journey you've made with your family. We find your doctrine in good order, and your credentials are impeccable. Your preaching is quite excellent. But, well . . . frankly, we feel that right now, well—you're not the right candidate for us." there was an awkward pause, then she said, "Why"?

Commonly, our prejudice is born of unfamiliarity than familiarity, and the biases we absorb from those about us, whom we trust.

Was Jesus an exception to all this?

Our text from Mark 7 sets Jesus in gentile territory away from the homeland of Israel. He needs desperately to get a moment of peace away from the rancorous religious leaders, the Pharisees and Scribes. But even on the distant coast of Phoenicia by the Mediterranean, word follows of his presence. He tries to gain some desperately needed rest and solitude in a house there. He's dog-tired, but he's discovered by a gentile woman, from the Roman province of Syria (which extended to the coast).

Not only is this unnamed woman frantic to have Jesus heal her daughter, she also abandons all boundaries of social conduct. A woman would *never* approach a man uninvited or announced, unless for illicit reasons. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, on the lowest rung of her culture's ladder—such that she has to draw water from the well in the heat of midday, so as not to have to bear the

reproach of the other women in the early morning. Recall how she was horrified that Jesus, a Jew, would even speak to her. Remember the woman who suffers from hemorrhaging (Mark 5:25-34), who despite her twelve years of social ostracism breaks through to touch the hem of his robe and be healed. Or the woman, to the horror of the Pharisees who comes into a house where Jesus is a guest, and washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair, out of sheer gratitude. These were all Jewish women in a male dominant culture. The woman who now bursts into the house where Jesus is, is a gentile, several rungs beneath everyone else on society's ladder.

Jesus is exhausted, craving some small solitude from the demands of his ministry. She falls to the floor at his feet, begging him to exorcise the demon that possesses her daughter. So far he's ministered almost exclusively to Jews. Instead of his customary compassion he makes a jolting statement that's way distant from the person we're used to. To this gentile he responds, "Let the children [that is, the Jews] be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But with a fire in her soul for her tormented daughter, she answers like a mother who will not give an inch of ground to save her precious child. "Sir," she says—and you can almost feel her mother's unwavering, steely resolve—as if saying 'You may be the prophet of God, but I would not toy with me on this!' She says "Sir, even the *dogs* under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Does this catch Jesus in a rare moment of human frailty? Perhaps it's just not yet the time he'd planned to minister among the gentiles. Whatever—he gives in. He had seemed to *raise* the stakes when he said "Let the children [the Jews] be fed first." The word for 'fed' here does not mean given a fair portion; it means 'fed until full' with no room for more. But she says, "even the dogs"—meaning domesticated house dogs—"under the table eat the children's crumbs." And as Pheme Perkins has astutely noted, even the dogs under the table are recognized by the family as part of the household. That is, part of God's family.

Jesus is outmaneuvered with the very tactics he so often uses to outwit—but more accurately "to best" his opponents with the wisdom of God. So Jesus retreats and honors her request. "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

We call Jesus fully human and fully divine. And so he is. Yet can one be fully human without a capacity to grow, a competence to amend a wise thought with a wiser thought, to learn from momentary error? Is it possible—if Jesus shares our humanity in all respects—not to make a mistake? I know I almost made a mistake once, but then, blissfully, discovered that I was right after all! You know that feeling, I'm sure. In this case a desperate and determined call from a hurting child of God (the mother) for her own hurting child of God (gentile or no), who insists on being heard and recognized as such. Her plea insists—that even a divine agenda be subject to some amendment in the face of the very hurting humanity that he has come to save. Like the importunate widow before the judge in Jesus' own parable (Luke 18:1-8), the mother persists that her daughter get at least the scraps Jesus speaks of. They, too, are children of the one God.

If Jesus is willing to change his view of one too commonly despised. Should not we make a determined effort also to amend our course? For there, but for the grace of God, go you and I.

And if, like Jesus, we are at first prone to hold to our own agenda, we do well to listen to the words of Rabbi Hillel, a near contemporary of Jesus, who said:

"If not me, who? If not now, when?"

Amen.