

Sermon

Proper 18B September 8, 2024

Mark 7:24-37

Doctrinally speaking, what TWO things do we claim to know about Jesus? 1) He was fully human; and 2) he was fully divine. There are other aspects about him, but those two – fully human and fully divine – are at the core of who we believe Jesus was.

Today's gospel passage is a direct continuation of last week and it, more than any other place in the gospels (with the exception of the birth stories) shows the human side of Jesus.

If you remember last week's gospel, it had Jesus confronting Pharisees and scribes about the issue of hand washing. This wasn't about sanitary practices, this was about "unclean" hands touching clean or holy things and defiling them, thereby making them unusable. And what did Jesus have to say about that? It's not what's outside that defiles us, but it's what comes from within that defiles a person.

It is very clear that Jesus is telling his listeners and us that things we thought were unclean, impure, or defiling, aren't necessarily so. Certain foods won't defile you. Other ethnic groups or people won't defile you. What defiles you, and what defiles other people through you, are things like theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander, and the like. Those are the evil and defiling things within us that cause problems.

And it's here that we need to remember how we started: that we hold Jesus to be fully human and fully divine. As one Eucharistic Prayer says, "He lived as one of us, yet without sin." Jesus was sinless, but humans make mistakes. We also learn. As a carpenter's son, I'm guessing that Jesus made the mistake of cutting something too short, thereby learning to measure twice and cut once.

As a Jew, he learned about the law and about non-Jewish people. He would have learned that Moabites were not to be allowed into the household of God. He would have learned that people from Uz are evil. He would have learned women are property and not to be treated as equals – maybe even learning that they were viewed as lower than dogs

All of this was learned by the human Jesus. As a Jewish boy and a Jewish man, he was steeped in the traditions and socialized into the Jewish way of life.

So when he went to Tyre (Gentile territory, by the way) he did so incognito, not wanting people to know he was there. Recently he had fed 5000 people. He had been mobbed by sick people in every city, village, and farm. And he had just had yet another confrontation with Pharisees and scribes. My interpretation is that he is tired, frazzled, and overwhelmed. He needs a break to recharge. I get it. I've been there, just as recently as last week.

So here's Jesus in dire need of a break when a *woman*, a *Gentile woman*, and maybe a *single woman*, approaches him. She is the wrong gender, the wrong nationality, the wrong religion, and the wrong race. In other words, she embodies all those outside conditions that would defile a Jewish man.

She comes to him and begs, "Sir, my daughter has a demon. Please heal her."

The human Jesus who is stressed and tired, who has been raised and socialized in Jewish laws, traditions, and biases, looks at this outsider and says, "It's not fair to throw the children's food to you dogs." To which she replies, "But sir, even the dogs under the table eat the crumbs."

Have you ever said or done something only to have it come back and bite you in the you-know-what? Years ago I was on a VFD and we heard about an incident at another department where they drove into one of their bay doors. We all laughed at them, wondering how you do that with a fire truck. Not long after that, a crew from our station responded to a call, pushed the "down" button too soon, the door came down on our water cannon, damaging both the door and cannon. Oops. That's just one humorous story, but there have also been more serious incidents, both with me and, I'm sure, you if you think hard enough. And when they happen, you probably had a clear vision or revelation of, "Oops." Or, "Well, dangit." Or something similar or more colorful.

I have this image of the human Jesus hearing these words from this woman, replaying what he had just said about outside stuff not defiling, and then thinking, "Oh *SNAP!*" He has this sudden realization that he was just doing what the Pharisees were doing - basing defilement on outside conditions.

Oops. My bad. You're right. Go, the demon has left your daughter.

Humans make mistakes, and hopefully we learn from them. This is the one place in scripture where we see that fully human side of Jesus. For a brief moment he let his human biases get in the way. For a brief moment, he slipped. For a brief moment, the human tendency to focus inward and show disgust toward outsiders ruled. For a brief moment, his human disdain for that which could defile came out. But only for a brief moment.

After his, "Oh snap" moment, after his realization that he has just behaved like the Pharisees, his human side moved toward the God he was proclaiming. He became that much more com-compassionate. He became that much more accepting. He became that much more understanding. In that moment, Jesus learned.

We all have our edges. We all have certain biases against other groups or outsiders. We all worry to some extent about being defiled. But, as Jesus discovered, those are learned behaviors. And learned behaviors can be unlearned or changed.

We've just come through the Bread of Life discourse where we spent a whole lot of time talking about being infused with the presence of Christ. As hard as it might be to think about how that might look, the harder thing might just be for us to follow Jesus' example, confronting our own biases, and getting rid of them in favor of seeing people as God sees them and as Jesus came to see the Syrophoenician woman - a beloved child of God who has every right to be here as you. May we be as quick to recognize and change our own biases as Jesus was.

Amen.