

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Year B, Proper 18
September 6, 2009
Mark 7:24-37

In today's story we have a sick child and a mom at wits end. I bet many of you can relate to this circumstance quite well. I bet many of you can imagine the relationship between mom and daughter. Perhaps it is like many of the parent-child relationships you have experienced in your own lives.

There is love between the mother and the daughter. There is concern on the part of the mother. Fear on the part of the daughter (and likely the mother as well). There is frustration at the situation - the constant feeling of being sick and in pain, the constant feeling of being not-quite-right. The story refers to a demon; we can probably guess any number of things that have caused the daughter to be sick. Likewise, we can probably guess how many options the mom has considered in order for her child to be well again.

I bet this is a woman who has tried every home remedy under the sun. If this story were to take place today I can imagine that she has taken her daughter to doctors, acupuncturists, hypnotists, herbalists. She has taken advice from friends and neighbors and family members. She has cooked up awful tasting drink concoctions full of vitamins, fish oil and garlic. The daughter is beginning to think her mom is nuts. And maybe her mom is acting a little crazy, a little too willing to break social norms. But for the mom, this is the price to be paid for seeking her daughter's wellbeing.

But her daughter feels things couldn't possibly be any worse. Not only is she sick but her mom is soooo embarrassing. When she hears her mom is going to try to talk with Jesus, the girl calls after her, "Whatever you do, just don't embarrass our family anymore. Please don't do anything inappropriate."

I imagine her mom walking out the door, sunglasses on, large pocket book over her shoulder. A little like Erin Brockovich on a mission, ready to shake things up a bit and bring a little justice into the situation.

And like the authority figures Brockovich faced in her legal battles, the authority figure in this case didn't take kindly to the intrusion into his personal space.

The woman walks into a stranger's house, bows before Jesus and begs him to help her daughter. He replies, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Yup, Jesus basically refers to a woman seeking his help as a dog.

It is one of the most troubling encounters in the New Testament and there isn't any way around it.

Jesus knew his mission to be to the Jewish people. Jesus knew his mission to be to his *own* people. This woman was not one of his own. This woman, a Gentile, a Greek of Syrophenician origin, was outside the scope of his mission.

Yes, he was geographically in Gentile territory. But that didn't mean he was interested in ministering among Gentiles. Or at least didn't yet know that was what he was to do.

What he knew was that the Gentiles were landowners. They were exploiting the Jewish population. His Jewish brothers and sisters were suffering at their hands.

So, who did this woman think she was? Did she think just because she was a Gentile she had the right to just waltz into this Jewish home and request his help? Jesus was insulted.

Jesus couldn't see past the boundaries set up by his culture. The boundaries set up by society. Some people were in and some people were out. Whether you were in or out depended on perspective.

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," Jesus said.

Or: "What I have to give, I have to give to the Jewish people, the children of God. I cannot take away that which was promised to them by God. I cannot just throw away that which was covenanted to them. I can't give what my father gave me to just anyone. What I have to give is precious."

But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

In these eleven words, she both recognizes and challenges his authority. She acts according to her place in society and at the same time challenges that cultural construct.

She is still kneeling. She is begging. She is addressing Jesus as she would someone with authority.

Yet, she is not speaking as a weak whimpering dog that has just been kicked. With a penetrating gaze, she faces Jesus and says to him, with not a little bit of sass, that there are others out there hungry for what he has to offer. So hungry that they would scavenge for mere leftovers.

"I will take that insult," she says. "I will not let you get away with it, though. I take it and I am going to feed it back to you. I will show you that which you have yet to see. I will open your eyes to a newer and better understanding of the scope of your power and the scope of your mission. A scope which covers me and my daughter and a scope that goes even beyond us."

In this story, everyone agrees, the Syrophenician woman wins the verbal sparring match.

And in a beautiful turn of events. Jesus, with the same surety with which he insulted the woman, accepts her challenge.

"For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter."

The mom, ready to do anything to bring her daughter back to wholeness, ready to break every conceivable social barrier, ready to be inappropriate and unreasonable, ready to do ANYTHING for her daughter, shows Jesus that his ministry is to her daughter as much as it is to the Jewish daughters of Jerusalem and that the scope of his ministry is to be opened - to reach the daughters of China, Sudan, Qatar, Bolivia, Vietnam, America.

The entire Mission of Jesus Christ, the eternal word made flesh, turns on the words of a mom in distress.

Thank God she was not kept from this mission because of manners or appearances. Thank God for all the people in our world today who are not afraid to challenge social constructs or cultural norms. Thank God for all the people who risk their reputations to be at times politically incorrect or unpopular, to risk their security in order to break down barriers, to share their access to the powers-that-be with others.

Thank God for people who know, like the author of today's epistle, that the fruit of faith is good works. That their faith would be dead if not expressed or enacted.

Thank God for the friends and family we have and we can be for others. Thank God for friends like the friends we hear about in the second story. The friends who care enough to spend time with a deaf-mute, to dare to be in relationship with him for any amount of time, to share out of their wholeness so that he may experience healing.

Here was a person who couldn't hear. A person with jumbled speech. In those days, that meant a person who must be full of sin. A person unclean. A person from whom to stay away.

This man was on the outside, he was certainly not a person one should care deeply for, if one was concerned about social status and social norms. This was not a person to risk your reputation - your good name - to be seen with. Not a person to risk everything for so that he may meet with Jesus.

This is not a person who society says should have friends like this, willing to risk all for someone who is sinful and unclean. But thank God for these friends. Thank God for these people who against all understandings of what is considered appropriate and reasonable behavior brought this man to Jesus for healing.

The Gospel says, "Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."

"Be Opened." This is also all the Syrophenician woman yearned for when she spoke those challenging words to Jesus. When she demanded to be seen and recognized.

Be Open. To me. To my community. My concerns. My needs.

Open for me access to the kingdom of God.

And that is exactly what we hear Jesus ask of his Father. Looking up to heaven, Jesus says, "Be Opened"

Be opened to everyone. No exceptions!

The grace of God has no boundaries.

How much easier it is for us than it was for the mom and the friends of the deaf man to bring people into the healing presence of Jesus Christ. The only barriers that exist now are the ones we create. And though they seem so benign, they are often the hardest barriers to overcome.

How often does the desire to be appropriate and reasonable keep us from enacting the faith we express? How often are we frozen by our ego? By our supposed manners? By norms which only have meaning and power because we allow them to have meaning and power?

Faith without works is dead, the Epistle to James says.

Let it not be so for us.

Let not the desire to be appropriate and reasonable rob of us our mandate to enact our faith.

Amen.