

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid
 A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B | Mark 7:24-37
 St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA
 September 9th 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Now the woman was a Gentile."

From what Mark has told us, we don't particularly know very much about this woman who encounters a stubborn and -- dare I say -- *rude* Jesus in this morning's Gospel. She was not Jewish but a Gentile, one not from the people of Israel, one who was not a part of God's original chosen people. It's not like this was her fault. We can't help where we come from. Or who our parents are. Or what traditions we've been born into. For the Syrophenician woman, though, this seems to be the most important detail both for the author of Mark's Gospel and for Jesus himself:

"Now the woman was a Gentile."

But then again, Mark could have more accurately said "Now on this particular day when Jesus was wandering around, *everyone* he encountered was a Gentile." Because in this Gospel story, Jesus has ventured outside of Israel. He's in somewhat unfamiliar territory, not having spent a lot of time here -- in the region of Tyre and Sidon. And this may have been strange for Jesus, the Jesus born to Jewish parents who lived among other Jewish people in a Jewish town and who grew up very much in the Jewish faith. For him to venture outside of this religious and cultural bubble would have had consequences, it could have felt very different, and clearly, it led to an interesting conversation that had implications for the good news of Jesus reaching audiences outside of Jesus' home turf.

So we have a Gentile woman. Mark describes her as a Greek, particularly of Syrophenician origin. This description could suggest a few things -- that she may have spoken Greek, that she could have been educated, that we can figure out the region she came from -- but we can't really know for sure, and I'm not sure Mark needs us to know more than that. In the end, what it does tell us as biblical readers is that she was not from Israel, which is not an insignificant detail.

Because from their very different backgrounds, the Syrophenician woman and Jesus were almost destined not to get along. This might strike us as odd. After all, who couldn't get along with Jesus?! And as we've said, it's not this woman's fault as to her heritage and upbringing. So when we hear that her daughter is dire straits with an unclean spirit and that she comes to Jesus for help, we might hope and expect that Jesus would set aside ethnic and religious differences in order to help one who comes to him in faith.

But he doesn't. At least not at first. The plainest reading of the text suggests that he simply doesn't have time for this woman because she is a Gentile. Now there have been many readings of this story that try to imply that Jesus doesn't say what he actually said or try to lighten the blow or try to describe how, back then, the word "dog" wasn't as insulting as it actually sounds, but all of those interpretations kind of fall flat. So often we try to portray or think of Jesus as a docile, meek, sensitive figure, but that picture of him would fail to represent to whole truth, wouldn't it? Yes, he was as every way as we are and did not sin, but perhaps his own ingrained cultural background suggested a certain learning curve and growing edge to meeting new people outside of Israel. Essentially, for as much as we might want Jesus not to have said what he said to this woman, he did say it. Those are his words. When she came to him for help, he did in fact compare her to a dog licking up scraps under the dinner table. This exchange may not sit well with us, but I'd encourage us to think on a few things from this moment in the Gospels when Jesus sounds especially different than we're accustomed to hearing him.

First, on a theological level, salvation *was* promised first to the Jews. Both our society and even the Church seem to believe in an idea that everyone, regardless of belief or background, is a "child of God." It's a desirable thought, to be

sure, but it's not entirely the picture as painted by holy scripture. We are all known by God and all made in the image of God -- this much is true. And God certainly loves all of creation, including human beings, though the original *children of God* were the people of Israel, chosen by God to be a privileged people for the sake of God's purpose through the promise and covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead, through Christ's redeeming work, we have been adopted as heirs into a new family, and we who have been adopted into this family can now call God "Father" because Jesus told us we can and should. St. Paul says it another way, that through Christ, salvation has come "to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." And yet, as we see in end of this story, maybe there's enough food at this table for everyone, not just for certain children anymore.

Second, Jesus seems to have gone through something we might know well, be it from our own travels to new places, or confronting others who disagree with our sports allegiances or political choices, or any number of other identities we have -- and that is that human difference can be hard to deal with. Certainly, even the Son of God had to get used to the fact that cultures outside of Israel were different than his own. Sometimes, deep down, there can be a desire to identify as being different than others that is much more powerful than the desire to see commonalities, but at the same time, that doesn't mean those differences can't be reconciled or that we can't be surprised by those with whom we differ.

Which brings us to our final point -- in the end, Jesus seems to have learned something by getting bested in a witty back and forth. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." I wonder how Jesus felt after saying that line. Probably that the conversation was over -- though many have read this line as a bit of a challenge from Jesus, that he was prompting the woman to come back with an even better comment that proved her faithfulness. So it's very possible that the Syrophenician woman was both anxious and excited because she was indeed being challenged *and* knew she had the final and best word: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It's not suggested in the text, but you can almost hear Jesus laughing with delight at her courage, at her faithfulness, at her boldness as she, a Gentile, responded perfectly to this Jewish Rabbi who had the power to heal her child. It's the only time in the Gospels that something like this happens, and truthfully, I find it both challenging and lovely that this story is in there. I especially appreciate that it seems to suggest that faithfulness in God transcends our differences, surprises us in ways we can never predict, and gives us a mandate to be humbled when we know we have been in the wrong.

There is a beautiful grace in this story, that this woman who we only knew as a Gentile, not a "child of God" in the same way as the people of Israel were, could go toe-to-toe with the Son of God in a battle of wits and words, so much so that he just may have grown in his own understanding of what difference really meant. What little we may have known about her has thankfully grown because this unnamed woman, though not of the people of Israel, was still very much created in God's image and worthy of Christ's respect. As is everyone you and I have ever disagreed with. As is everyone that is of a different faith than we are. As is everyone who is different than we are in any way. Thank God that the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus, as it turns out, and perhaps as Jesus really came to understand after this encounter, is for all people. So must our kindness be for all people. So must our respect be for all people. May we be ever give thanks for and be encouraged by the courage we just might find in those who are different that we are, and whose faith in the one God of Israel might surprise and delight us.

Amen.