

“Dogs and Tricks” (5Sept21)
Mark 7:24-37

“This Jesus may not fit well into comfortable suburban churches but was probably a hit in the back alleys and taverns of the empire...at home among the unwashed masses.”

So says Ted Jennings in a provocative commentary on this passage. Here’s more:

This story has often served as a source of embarrassment for those who desire to present Jesus as a compulsive do-gooder with refined sensibilities. Mark’s narrative regularly offends this point of view. Mark presents Jesus as an irascible and (sometimes) reluctant wonder-worker. If we wish to understand this narrative...then we must surrender preconceptions of [Jesus as] a pious and courteous saint...and, instead, attend to this rather blunt-spoken teacher and ill-tempered doer of mighty deeds.*

I don’t know if you’d consider yourself part of a comfortable suburban church or if you find this offensive Jesus a hit. But I’m always insistent that God’s got good news for us, even in difficult Bible readings and our hard times, so let’s attend to this irascible unsaintly Jesus.

This passage with the woman and her daughter is so disagreeable that Luke entirely cut it out of his version. In a culture where dogs were dirty street creatures, mongrels, Jesus insults the girl and her mother. “It’s not fair to throw children’s food to little dogs!” he says, perhaps sneering.

It doesn’t help much to observe that Jesus is reacting as a typical Jewish man of his time would if a non-Jewish woman had the gall to approach him with demands, breaking social conventions. Even if that was a standard reaction, just because something used to be common doesn’t mean it was okay. We know that now better than ever. Christianity still must take responsibility for the past ill treatment of women and others—and often not very far enough past.

Further, we expect better from Jesus. Usually his interactions with women should’ve been a

model these centuries when we had still gotten it wrong.

But this today definitely doesn’t seem like the Jesus who “loves the little children, all the children of the world” as he sounds mean to this woman’s child.

On the other hand, when I say “yes, Jesus loves me,” I have to realize there’s some offense in that claim. What would make me so loveable? At the very least, like those in the story, I’m not part of Jesus’ Jewish community, so including me would’ve been anathema. And I’m just a hypocritical comfortable suburban church member, who wants a kind do-gooder Jesus, even while I don’t manage to be that much myself.

So what’s the right to be included by Jesus? For my part, I count on grace to bridge the divide. The woman relies on her argument. After Jesus’ insult about it not being fair to throw food to little dogs, she retorts that dogs can eat crumbs the children drop.

Maybe she’s got a better view of God’s abundance, that God’s table is overflowing and even a crumb of God’s goodness is enough. Or perhaps it’s her thoughtful turning and extending of Jesus’ metaphor.

Whatever it is, it’s sufficient to change Jesus and for her to get what she wants. He praises her logic, her words, her reasoning, which steps away from his Jewish justifications as he compliments what a good Greek she is.

But this isn’t just about her getting what she wanted, not a story of a particular woman and her daughter. This is much larger and more emblematic of what Jesus was up to, including in relationship with us.

First, this is remarkably the only time Jesus loses an argument. In a culture that put great stock into the sparring of a verbal judo match, no other time does Jesus get taken down by an opponent.

In this one instance, when Jesus squares off with the culture’s stereotypical no-holds-barred ferocity against a foreign woman, he then backs down and declares her the winner. While he

* *The Insurrection of the Crucified: The ‘Gospel of Mark’ as Theological Manifesto*, p108

could've maintained his place by repeating the insult and saying "go away, dog," instead he concedes.

More than her winning an argument, in that culture Jesus' reputation was at stake, and it meant he received shame and handed off his honor to her. It is a major upset, and an exact reversal of their standings vis-à-vis each other at the start of the encounter.

Jesus, the big loser, seems happy at exchanging his insider prestige for her outsider disgrace. He likes it so much that, rather than rushing back to the safety of stature amid his own people, he seeks out more interactions with non-Jews. The travel itinerary in our reading portrays Jesus bypassing his hometown to go find more Gentiles. He's evidently decided that the little dogs will get their share of bread. In fact, in the verses right after our reading today, he does that very thing, feeding 4000 of them in a story that parallels the more familiar miracle of feeding of 5000 of his own people.

Before he gets to that, we're told he meets a man who can't hear. Just as the woman advocates for her daughter, this man has friends who ask Jesus to help.

We know from Jesus having healed the daughter that he can simply say something from a distance and cause health. But in this instance, he does strange magic tricks: he takes the man aside, puts his fingers in his ears, spits and touches the guy's tongue, groans loudly to the sky, and says a foreign sounding word. If this seems a little like a magician waving their hands and saying "abracadabra,"** that's exactly what it's supposed to sound like. That culture was used to such hocus pocus from healers, so Jesus meets them on their cultural turf. Again, he's giving up something of himself for the sake of reaching out to foreigners and outsiders.

The end result is amazing. Ears are unstopped and mouths opened. This is what Jesus has been trying to foster with his disciples, to give them ears to hear, get them to preach the good news. They

continually don't get it, but this man and his people accomplish it right away.

To back up again, more than simply being on another culture's terms, Jesus also, in a way, gives up something. Healing this man involved a triple contamination. He was a non-Jew, which we've already heard was off-limits. He's blind, and contact with him would also make Jesus unholy. And then there's the spit. Coming into contact with spit, according to Leviticus (15:8) made a person unclean. Three-for-three.

But again, Jesus does it as a reversal. As he's absorbing this triple threat of impurity, he instead is offering—spreading—wellness. With him, it is health that is contagious. You get infected by his purity. I love how this works in the Gospel stories, and my standard characterization is that one good apple saves the whole bunch.

We're used to spoilage and contamination and contagion. Much too used to it. Especially as our own cultural setting involves spread of toxin so pervasive we can hardly keep away from it. While hearing a story about spit that heals, you're home for worship precisely because we can't trust the cleanness of spit that floats in the air when we're around each other.

So I can't oversimplify this into an easy exchange rate, can't make the metaphor so quickly effective that churchly proximity to spit and not distancing would be salutary and health-giving. But I'm sure these stories must have relevance for our own setting.

Maybe, as we consider Labor Day and vocations, we see it in health care workers who sacrifice their own health to help another's sickness, or firefighters who face danger in order to extend security, or rescue workers who risk a flood to bring safety. Or we fight to help the wages of those who serve us. Or in parents who give up life to offer life.

That these exchanges are laborious we see also with this Jesus who can be ornery and not just courteous. Still, we trust his emptying brings fullness. He lays down his life to take it up again.

** There are some interesting, surprisingly-relevant etymologies to this word. e.g. <http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-abr1.htm>

Jesus comes onto our turf, into this strange world, when even our suburbs aren't all that comfortable. He comes to give us himself, his goodness. He exchanges death for his life. He must also take sorrow to give joy. He comes into your own home, taking you off to the side, somehow to restore you to larger community, larger even than you anticipated beforehand, at a table more abundant than can be held.

If you're wondering about your part, you may come begging and arguing, pleading like the woman, when Jesus doesn't seem very approachable. You may be insistent on what you need, or what you see others need. It may seem insulting that God could do something, when it feels like nothing is happening and God is leaving you out. That may rightly be the shape of firm faith.

Or you may be tongue-tied, hardly able to hear the message, and yet Jesus is coming across to you, through any barriers. You may be trying to adopt his ways, or may feel far and offensive.

You may find this irascible unsaintly reluctant God to be just what you need. Or you may just be wanting some order, somebody to act appropriately, more compulsive in good-deed-doing, to make things fair. And still Jesus is reaching out, happily exchanging his goodness for you.