

Rev. Shannon J Kershner
9-6-09
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 7:24-38

Being Open to More

It had not been that long since Jesus had run into Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. Before their encounter, Jesus had been doing his normal “boundary breaking” stuff—crossing over the sea to Gentile territory; trying to teach his disciples that God was doing a very big thing through him; proclaiming with word and deed that God’s circles of inclusion were growing larger and larger; and sending his love and mercy to ripple out farther and farther into the world.

And after he crossed back over the sea into his home territory, Jesus ran into Jairus. Jairus was a leader of the synagogue whose daughter was straddling that space between life and death. So Jairus went looking for Jesus. When he found him, Jairus fell to his knees and begged for Jesus’ help. “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” It must have been a shock for people to see this Jewish leader falling at Jesus’ feet, because begging for help was not the typical M.O. of a leader. But I doubt Jesus even thought much about Jairus’ official position as he saw him fall on his knees. Knowing what we know of Jesus, I am willing to bet that all Jesus saw was a father who was desperate to get healing for his daughter. Jesus did not see an elite religious leader. Jesus saw a scared parent who had been brought to his knees by his daughter’s suffering. And Jesus responded with compassion and grace and gave them a miracle.

And it is because Jesus immediately responded to Jairus and his daughter that I am deeply troubled by his lack of response to the Syrophoenician woman and her daughter. His lack of response just does not make sense to me. For in the two chapters between his encounter with Jairus and his encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus was being the Jesus we know and love – proclaiming with his words and with his deeds that God’s circles of inclusion were growing larger and larger, and his own love and mercy were rippling out farther and farther.

And then, another parent burst onto Jesus’ scene. But this time, unlike with Jairus, it was a woman. And this time, unlike with Jairus, we do not have a name. And this time, unlike with Jairus, she was a Syrophoenician Gentile, instead of a Jewish leader. And this time, unlike with Jairus, Jesus seems to not see the desperate mother who had been brought to her knees by her daughter’s suffering. Rather, unlike with Jairus, Jesus looks at her and only seems to see Gentile, outsider, unclean woman who has invaded his space.

I keep saying “seems to see” because I want to give Jesus an out with all of this. If I say “seems to see,” than that means that Jesus may not have **really** been so cold and detached as it appears. If I say “seems to see,” than that means that maybe Jesus was just creating a teachable moment for the disciples. He would pretend not to be merciful to that woman so that he could demonstrate how such an attitude was detrimental to his mission. Some biblical commentators give Jesus that kind of out, too. They write that surely Jesus was just trying to be a living lesson for his disciples. He was just setting them up for his about-face in order to shock them more dramatically¹.

But honestly, just reading the plain sense of the text, “seems to see” is nowhere to be found. Rather, we find this desperate mother who, like Jairus, had heard of this Jesus and his ability to heal and make whole; and who, like Jairus, was willing to do anything for her daughter to have

another chance at life. And we find a Jesus who, unlike when he was with Jairus, all of the sudden seemed to be struggling with his job description of being Savior.

And instead of immediately responding with compassion and grace, Jesus stared into the eyes of this mother, and only saw her through the lens of his childhood and his culture, which meant not really seeing her at all. “Let the children be fed first,” he stated as she begged him for help. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Now, given that time and place and culture, the mother probably expected such a response. She had heard her people referred to as dogs her entire life. It was a common epithet for Gentiles. Throughout her entire growing up years, she had been told she was an outsider to the God of Israel’s covenant love. She knew as she burst onto Jesus’ scene that she would be seen primarily as foreigner and as intruder. So it is very reasonable to expect that Jesus’ response did not shock her. But, his response sure shocks me.

Frankly, I find Jesus’ words to be an appalling response from my Lord and Savior. Why? Because I expect more from Jesus. I expect him to **always** live into his boundary-breaking, radical call. I expect him to **always** be perfectly exuding love and grace and righteous mercy. Frankly, I guess I just don’t ever really expect him to actually be human, just like I am. But I have to wonder if Mark included this story in his Gospel because that is **exactly** what is going on here in this interaction. Jesus is showing his humanity. Jesus is doing what we all can do -- espousing what he grew up with; acting in ways that have always just been accepted; and, in this particular moment, holding firm to all of the established boundaries between his life and hers.

And his full-out, “in our collective face,” humanity makes this story hard to handle. Because even though we say that we believe in the incarnation just as much as we believe in the resurrection, we struggle with the human Jesus whenever we see him struggle. The Gospel of Luke may indeed tell us that the boy-Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, in divine and human favor. But when it comes right down to it, we always just want to assume that Jesus always had it perfectly figured out, all along. It is just so much easier and less complicated to assume that Jesus always knew and completely understood his call from the moment he emerged from Mary’s womb, red-faced and crying, to the moment he stepped back out of the tomb. We don’t like to think about the fact that Jesus had a learning curve as to who he was and what he was being called to do as Messiah, Emmanuel.

And why is that, do you think? Why is it easier to concentrate on to Jesus’ full divinity rather than on his full humanity? Maybe it’s because we can keep him more at arms’ length that way. If we just consider his divinity and put his messy humanity out of our minds, then we can simply observe the footsteps and journey of Jesus, rather than actually try to walk in them and to go where he went. We can say, “Oh, well of course Jesus challenged the powers of the empire. Of course Jesus spoke out on behalf of the poor. Of course Jesus took unpopular and dangerous risks by the company he kept and the ministry he did. Of course Jesus gave it all away. He was a part of God. We can’t be expected to do any of that. We’re just human, after all.”

So when we see Jesus like we see Jesus today, being obviously very human, it throws our excuses about not being up to following him out the window. When we take Jesus’ humanity as seriously as we take his divinity, then it means that we cannot just observe him anymore. We actually could, if we wanted to, step in beside him and do as he did, since he was not only God, but God-in-flesh.

So let us try that together, right now. Let us take his humanity as seriously as we take his divinity, and step in beside him as that woman throws herself at his feet. Let us be open to what we might learn about what being fully human looks like. Let us see what we see:

We first see that though we might have run out of the room with such a cold reception, the mother did not let Jesus' unresponsiveness stop her. As we said earlier, she was probably expecting it. And so, as Luther once preached, instead of being stopped by Jesus' non-reaction, she laid hold of him. She laid hold of Jesus with a ferocity born of her love for her sick child. She laid hold of Jesus with a bigger picture of who he was than even he could see at that time. She laid hold of Jesus, took his words, and completely reframed the argument. "Sir, even the dogs get to eat the crumbs. Sir, you are sent to Israel, but we Gentiles need you too. Sir, you are the Savior of the chosen people, but you are my Savior, my daughter's Savior, as well."

And sisters and brothers, as we look into that mother's tenacious face and as we look beside us to see Jesus' reaction, something has obviously changed. Maybe Jesus was just tired and wanted to be done with her. Maybe her refusal to let him go changed his mind. Or, maybe through her voice, Jesus clearly heard the voice of another – the voice of the one who had named him and claimed him at his baptism—the voice of the one he called Father—now calling him to widen the circle of his saving ministry even further than he expected.

You look at the way Mark tells the story and it is obvious that something was triggered in Jesus. You hear it in his voice. "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." And as we step in beside Jesus, taking his humanity as seriously as we take his divinity, we are stunned to realize that we are watching Jesus grow and change in his understanding of who he was called to be as Messiah, Emmanuel. We are stunned to realize that God spoke to God's Son through the voice of a foreign mother who helped him see an expanded and fuller mission.

And we do not simply see that change in Jesus by the way he responds to that mother. We see the effects of this change in Jesus right after she leaves, too. Jesus does not go back home to the Jewish territory. Instead, he makes his way to the Decapolis, a network of ten Greek cities, and continues his ministry thereⁱⁱ; living even more fully into his call to make boundary-breaking proclamations of God's widening circles of love and mercy that keep rippling out farther and farther.

And perhaps as a result of watching and listening and learning from this encounter—the encounter between Jesus, our human brother and divine Savior, with the foreign, nameless, mother-- we, too, might start to wonder what God is saying to us through the voices of others. How is our call growing and changing? What does God's larger picture look like for our life, for our work, for our congregation, for our mission? And are we willing to show the same kind of openness and courage that was shown by our Jesus, the one who is our Savior AND our brother?

ⁱ Blount, Brian, and Gary Charles. Preaching Mark in Two Voices. Louisville: WJK Press, 2002, page 125.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. Page 126.