

PSALM 125:1-5

- ¹Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.
- ²As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people,
from this time on and forevermore.
- ³For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
so that the righteous might not stretch out
their hands to do wrong.
- ⁴Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts.
- ⁵But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways
the LORD will lead away with evildoers.
Peace be upon Israel!

MARK 7:24-30

²⁴From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

SERMON

Ok, so that story. It's not an easy one. Amy-Jill Levine is a scholar of the New Testament I read from time to time, and she calls the Jesus that appears in the book of Mark the "Xenophobic Jesus." And she's not wrong about that characterization. Jesus is rude, callous, and xenophobic of not outright racist in this little story.

Jesus has been wandering around, teaching and doing miracles like usual, and he's tired. So, off he trots to the region of Tyre. Tyre is a little coastal town in the region of Phoenicia, a Gentile area of the Mediterranean. Remember, Jesus is a Jew, and the gentiles are people who aren't Jewish, like the Greeks and the Romans. So, while Jesus is there, even though he just wants to rest, he can't escape some notoriety, and a woman comes and finds him. A gentile mother from this area, a mother of a daughter who is suffering. She comes to Jesus and begs him to heal her daughter, to release her from this demon. Begs him, and while the Bible is a bit sterile in this description because of the compact language, I imagine this must have been a pretty undignified scene. I know I would have been in hysterics if I came to a man who I thought could heal my suffering child. And Jesus snaps at her and is really rude. He says, "let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Which, to be very clear, means that Jesus is calling this mother and her daughter, along with the gentile people, dogs. Which is every bit as offensive as it sounds. He's saying, "I'm here to take care of the Jews. You don't register to me, you're like an animal."

And in response, the mother, instead of being silenced or lashing out at him, is sharp and witty: "Even the dogs get the crumbs, Jesus." And this is so clever. She doesn't try to change the premise of his point, it's as if she's accepted the fact that she and her daughter are no more than dogs, but even then, even the dogs get a little. It seems to catch Jesus off guard and change his mind about the situation. And Jesus grants her request, her daughter is healed, because of the argument she made.

Now, as if this story weren't complicated enough, there's a historical detail that kind of throws a wrench in this story. It's true enough that Jesus may simply have been tired, cranky, and a little short tempered when he spoke, not that any of that excuses his rudeness. But, it's also true that in the area of Tyre, the gentiles tended to be wealthy city-people and the Jews were the poorer, rural farmers who supplied the wealthy city-people with food. Jesus may also be angry at this woman because she's a wealthy gentile, a representative of the forces oppressing the poorer Jewish population in this area. So, this is a weird story, we have elements of race, class, and gender, as well as the theological implications of Jesus' rudeness, the idea that Jesus could be wrong and change his mind, and the shift in focus from Jesus being for the Jews to Jesus being for everyone. This is a story we should come back to, time and again, because there are always new questions to be raised.

But for today, what I was compelled to see in this story was a model for how we should engage in those difficult, complicated, murky conversations. Because it seems to me that our world is full of difficult, awkward conversations these days. About race, about class, about immigration, about any manner of topics over which reasonable people disagree. Jesus does two really important things here. He takes his lumps, and he allows his own perspective to be challenged and changed.

First, Jesus takes his lumps in this story. Jesus is rude and downright mean. He's wrong to call this woman and her daughter "dogs." And when she calls him on it, he doesn't explain it away as being tired or hungry, he doesn't argue with her over semantics or get entrenched in his position, he doesn't dismiss her point of view.

Instead, Jesus takes his lumps. He acknowledges the validity and power of her argument, and he changes his mind. When we have hard conversations, we're going to say things that are wrong or maybe even offensive, and other people will say things that hurt us. Hopefully more out of naivety than out of malice or hate. But when we do step out of line and insult with our words, we need to follow Jesus. Take our lumps, and allow our own perspectives to be changed. It's hard, but saying "I'm sorry, I was wrong," is one of the most powerful phrases we can say.

Second, Jesus allows himself to be challenged and changed in this encounter. Mark, the writer of this gospel story, takes great pains throughout his book to show that Jesus came for all people, not just the Jews. He starts, as Levine says, as the Xenophobic Jesus, but who he is shifts and changes with this encounter, and the same should be true for us. We should follow the example of Jesus and allow our own lives to be changed by the stories and experiences of the other people we come to know and encounter.

In reading this story, it makes me wonder. I've always thought the miracle here was the release of the little daughter from her demon. But this time around, I'm not so sure. What if the miracle here isn't the exorcism, but instead the miracle is Jesus overcoming boundaries, and perhaps even his own internal prejudice, in order to hear the words of this woman. To allow her story to change him and his future ministry. Reading the newspaper over the summer, I honestly think that's probably the greater miracle...a human being acknowledging and overcoming their own prejudices to engage and learn from another. I don't see that much these days, but I think we desperately need it.

There are dozens of examples of these kind of difficult conversations I could highlight. One for the PCUSA these days has been same sex marriages, how do we sort ourselves around that divisive and emotional issue? We could talk about the role of educational debt on the life-long earning prospects of men and women in their 20s and 30s. That's a hard conversation, especially across generational lines, and I often hear a distinct lack of generosity or understanding in either direction. What if we were to follow the example of Jesus and this mother? To allow our own perspectives and opinions to be challenged and changed as they encounter stories and experiences that aren't our own?

Or, to pick a really tough topic, how about the impact of race on how a person lives and interacts with the world? Race is so complicated, and it can feel very scary to have a conversation about, because at least for me, I'm always worried about saying something "wrong." I was really surprised and delighted by the paintings by Mary Engelbreit I found earlier this summer, on the cover of your bulletin. Now, Mary Engelbreit is usually known more for sweet, clever, kind of silly paintings. One of my favorites depicts a little girl sitting in a large chair, covered with bowls. The caption of the picture says "Life is just a chair of bowlies." Or another one shows a girl walking through the woods, the caption says "don't let anyone drive you crazy, it's right nearby anyway, and the walk will do you good." Engelbreit is known for playing with words and spoonerisms, creating silly puns and almost sacchrine-sweet pictures.

So, I really responded to her paintings from earlier this summer, because they weren't what I expected. She used her signature

comforting artistic style to show a deep and powerful message. A message that is challenging for me to hear, but I know it's true. Here, in the United States, parents of black children, especially of black boys, feel that they need to teach their sons a way of interacting with this world that will keep them safe. It's right there on the little newspaper in Engelbreit's drawing, "Hands up, don't shoot." It's uncomfortable and difficult for me to hear, because that's honestly a fear I do not carry for my own children. I don't worry about them interacting with gang violence, I don't worry about them being shot playing with a toy gun, I don't worry about a routine traffic stop escalating into something more significant. And it's painful for me to know that other parents in this country live with those fears for their sons and daughters.

Earlier this summer I read a memoir by a black father named Ta-Nehisi Coates. The book is a letter to his fifteen-year-old son. It was a beautiful and incredibly difficult read, because Coates' perspective was so challenging to my own. Like that second Engelbreit drawing says, I needed to be made very uncomfortable in order to hear Coates' story. Because his story is filled with fear. Fear for the life and safety of his son, a good, smart, thoughtful teenage boy. Coates fears, with good reason and experience, that his own son's life could be ended by one racist act. One act of violence. And it's not an outlandish fear for him to have. Coates' story traces his own life, which has been filled with the gang violence of Baltimore, the loss of a friend in a police shooting, and the relentless small slights of being black in America. Followed around a store by a security guard, the "school-to-prison" pipeline, and so much more.

These perspectives are hard for me to hear. They make me uneasy, and the questions they bring to my mind make me profoundly uncomfortable. But that doesn't make them wrong, in fact, I wonder if it makes them all the more "right." That mother 2000 years ago, so fearful and concerned over the life and health of her daughter, I wonder if the weight she carried was very similar to the weight carried by black mothers today. I wonder if the weight she carried felt the same as that shouldered by the mothers and fathers who bring their children to Europe or America, hoping for an escape from violence and a better life? I wonder if that weight felt the same as young parents, wondering how they will make ends meet with the heavy combination of low paying jobs, high rental costs, and ballooning student debt? I wonder if this woman, the Syrophonecian woman, is in so many ways a reflection of the weight many of us carry, and the desire to be understood and not dismissed easily.

So, I'll say it one more time: what if the miracle here isn't the exorcism, but instead the miracle is Jesus overcoming boundaries, and perhaps even his own internal prejudice, in order to hear the words of this woman. To allow her story to change him and his future ministry. What would it look like for us to approach the stories and experiences of others with a sense of grace and compassion? To hear their stories, and rather than immediately disagreeing or finding points where they may be wrong, we allow the stories and experiences of others to challenge and change us? I wonder if the world would be a bit kinder and gentler if we all listened with generosity?

In the end, this is not a sweet, comforting story to sit with. But it's a story we must hear and consider. It's a perspective we must allow to change our own. And then let us give thanks, once again, for Jesus, that one who was fully God and yet also so fully human. Jesus, our brother, who has walked this road before us and will walk with us along this path, once again.¹

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/05/ferguson-art_n_6257340.html