

Mark 7: 24-37

AS A PARENT OF FIVE, I WAS ALWAYS FASCINATED BY THE ARGUMENTS MY CHILDREN WOULD COME UP WITH TO JUSTIFY BREAKING A RULE OR NOT FINISHING A CHORE. THEY WOULD ARGUE ABOUT THE CHORE'S IMPORTANCE, SUDDENLY DEVELOP ACHES AND PAINS, OR RAT OUT THEIR SIBLINGS FOR AN UNRELATED OFFENSE. THEY WOULD RESORT TO DESPERATE TACTICS IN ORDER TO AVOID CONSEQUENCES. THAT ALMOST ALWAYS FAILED. THEY SAY IN PARENTING, YOU PICK AND CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES, BUT WHEN YOU DO HAVE A BATTLE, MAKE SURE YOU WIN.

I CANNOT IMAGINE JESUS LOSING AN ARGUMENT, GIVEN HIS ABILITY TO LEAVE THE POWERFUL SPEECHLESS. HE OFTEN QUESTIONS RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND QUOTES SCRIPTURE TO MAKE POINTS THAT RELIGIOUS LEADERS CANNOT REFUTE. IN OTHER CASES, HE SIMPLY ASKS QUESTIONS THAT LEAVE HIS LISTENERS CONFUSED AND UNSATISFIED WITH THEIR OWN INEFFECTIVE ANSWERS.

AND YET A SYROPHOENICIAN GENTILE WOMAN IS APPARENTLY ABLE TO WIN AN ARGUMENT WITH JESUS HIMSELF.

AS ST. MARK DESCRIBES THE SCENE, JESUS IS FAR FROM HOME IN THE REGION OF TRYE AND SIDON...THAT IS GENTILE COUNTRY. AS FAR AS WE KNOW, HIS FRIENDS AREN'T WITH HIM, AND AS THE STORY MAKES CLEAR, HE WANTS TO BE LEFT ALONE. FOR MANY UNDERSTANDABLE REASONS, JESUS NEEDS A BREAK.

BUT A BREAK ISN'T WHAT HE GETS. INSTEAD, HE GETS A SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN..AN INCONVENIENT OUTSIDER WHO BARGES INTO THE HOUSE WHERE JESUS IS STAYING, BOWS DOWN AT HIS FEET, AND BEGS HIM TO HEAL HER DAUGHTER.

THIS WOMAN HAS EVERYTHING GOING AGAINST HER WHEN SHE PUSHED HER WAY INTO JESUS' PRESENCE. SHE WAS A WOMAN AND A GENTILE FROM THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS. SHE HAD NO RIGHT TO ENGAGE JESUS IN CONVERSATION. IMAGINE A PERSON LIVING ON THE STREETS IN WASHINGTON DC INTERRUPTING THE DINNER OF THE PRESIDENT TO ASK A FAVOR.

DESPITE THE CUSTOMS OF THE TIME, THIS WOMAN DOES APPROACH JESUS. SHE IS DRIVEN BY SOMETHING MORE POWERFUL THAN PROTOCOL; SHE IS DESPERATELY AFRAID FOR HER DAUGHTER'S LIFE. SHE BOWS BEFORE JESUS AND BEGS HIM TO CAST THE DEMON OUT OF HER DAUGHTER. IF THIS WAS MY FIRST TIME HEARING THE STORY, I MIGHT EXPECT JESUS TO SAY, "OF COURSE, I WILL SAVE YOUR DAUGHTER." BUT HE SAYS 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." JESUS IS TELLING THIS DESPERATE WOMAN THAT HIS MISSION IS FOR THE JEWS AND THE JEWS ALONE. AND SHE IS NOT A JEW. SHE IS A GENTILE. IN JESUS' DAY, JEWS AND

GENTILES DID NOT MINGLE WITH EACH OTHER. RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL CUSTOMS STRICTLY PROHIBITED IT. A GENTILE, A WOMAN, AND THE MOTHER OF A DEMON-TORTURED DAUGHTER..THREE STRONG RED FLAGS!

MANY WHO SUFFERED THOSE WORDS MIGHT HAVE CREPT AWAY, FEELING SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT, BUT NOT THIS WOMAN. SHE BOLDLY RESPONDS, "SIR, EVEN THE DOGS UNDER THE TABLE EAT THE CHILDREN'S CRUMBS." JESUS INSTANTLY UNDERSTANDS HER CHALLENGE. HIS MISSION IS NOT RESTRICTED TO THE JEWS. GOD'S LOVE EXPANDS, BEYOND ALL BARRIERS. RATHER THAN SCOLDING HER FOR HER BRASHNESS, JESUS TELLS HER, "FOR SAYING THAT, YOU MAY GO—THE DEMON HAS LEFT YOUR DAUGHTER."

THIS OUTSIDER, THE GENTILE WOMAN, THE "OTHER," IS SAYING TO JESUS: "WHERE'S MY GOOD NEWS? WHERE'S MY PLACE AT THE TABLE? WHEN WILL THE GOODNESS BE GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME AND FOR MY DAUGHTER? IF YOU ARE WHO YOU SAY YOU ARE, HOW CAN YOU BE CONTENT WHILE ANYONE GOES HUNGRY IN YOUR VICINITY? THIS WOMAN PUSHES JESUS...AS IF TO SAY...LOOK HARDER. PUSH FURTHER. SEE BETTER. BELIEVE THERE'S ENOUGH GOOD NEWS TO GO AROUND. EXPAND YOUR CIRCLE. DISSOLVE THE BOUNDARIES. WIDEN THE TABLE. PREACH YOUR GOOD NEWS TO ME..YES, EVEN ME...A GENTILE WOMAN.

AND GUESS WHAT? AFTER THAT JESUS GOES DIRECTLY INTO GENTILE COUNTRY WHERE A DEAF MAN WITH A SPEECH IMPEDIMENT IS BROUGHT TO HIM. THE PEOPLE BEG JESUS TO LAY HANDS ON THE MAN AND HEAL HIM. BEING DEAF IN THE FIRST CENTURY WAS NOT MERELY ABOUT NOT HEARING OR SPEAKING CLEARLY. FOR MANY PEOPLE, PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENT WAS VIEWED AS THE CONSEQUENCE OF SIN. PEOPLE WHO SUFFERED FROM BLINDNESS, DEAFNESS, OR WITHERED LIMBS HAD LITTLE OR NO STATUS. IN THOSE DAYS, PEOPLE WERE AFRAID OF PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES AND DID NOT UNDERSTAND THE BIOLOGY OF BIRTH DEFECTS. WHEN JESUS HEALED PEOPLE, HE NOT ONLY CORRECTED THEIR PHYSICAL PROBLEMS, HE ALSO RESTORED THEM TO COMMUNITY.

JESUS SEES BEYOND THIS MAN'S INFIRMITY. HE SEES HIS VALUE AS A CHILD OF GOD. JESUS HEALS HIM AND IMMEDIATELY THE DEAF MAN CAN HEAR AND SPEAK CLEARLY. HE IS RESTORED TO HIS COMMUNITY.

HUMAN BEINGS SUFFER FROM A DEEP INSECURITY THAT PUSHES US TO CREATE RULES THAT GIVE STATUS AND VALUE TO SOME WHILE DENIGRATING OTHERS. EVEN NOW IN THE 21ST CENTURY, COUNTLESS PEOPLE LIVE STILL LIVE AT THE MARGINS OF SOCIETY. THERE CONTINUES TO BE A SENSE THAT PEOPLE DOWN ON THEIR LUCK, PEOPLE WHO STRUGGLE IN LIFE, ARE WEAK AND IT'S SOMEHOW THEIR OWN FAULT. OUR SOCIETY TEACHES US TO SHUN THOSE WHO ARE "DIFFERENT." SHUN...TO QUESTION, TO BLAME. IF THEY'RE SO POOR, WHY DO THEY HAVE A CELL PHONE? WHY DO THEY HAVE A PET WHEN THEY DON'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY FOR FOOD? WHY DO THEY BUY FOOD THAT'S NOT HEALTHY?

THE SYROPHOENICAN WOMAN CALLED JESUS TO A MISSION OF INFINITE COMPASSION AND MERCY. NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR MITZ MINOR WRITES THAT MARK GIVES US GOD'S INITIATIVES IN THESE STORIES. JESUS' ACTIONS ILLUSTRATED THAT A "WORTHLESS, GENTILE GIRL WHOSE MIND WAS DEVoured BY A DEMON" AND A "GOOD FOR NOTHING DEAF MAN WHO COULDN'T EVEN SPEAK CLEARLY" WERE INDEED CHILDREN OF GOD TO BE EMBRACED AND VALUED. HUMANITY'S AUTHENTIC RESPONSE TO GOD'S INITIATIVE CALLS FORTH RECOGNITION THAT THERE ARE NO EXTERNAL BARRIERS BETWEEN GOD AND ANY HUMAN BEING: NOT RACE, CLASS, ETHNICITY, GENDER, AGE, OR PHYSICAL CONDITION. CONSEQUENTLY, THERE SHOULD ALSO BE NO SUCH BARRIERS BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS. CAN YOU THINK OF A PERSON, OR A GROUP OF PERSONS, YOU HAVE ASSIGNED AS WORTHLESS?

A FRIEND WHO PASTORS A LOCAL CONGREGATION RECENTLY SHARED A STORY THAT HAPPENED IN HIS CHURCH. ON THE OUTSIDE OF HIS CHURCH THERE IS A SIGN THAT READS "ALL WELCOME." A FEW WEEKS AGO ON A SUNDAY MORNING, A DISHEVLED GENTLEMAN ON A BICYCLE RODE BY THE CHURCH, READ THE SIGN ON THE DOOR, AND CAME INSIDE. WORSHIP HADN'T STARTED YET AND AS PEOPLE MILLED AROUND THE NARTHEX ENJOYING CONVERSATION AND COFFEE, THE MAN APPROACHED MY FRIEND AND ASKED, "IS THE SIGN TRUE? EVERYONE IS WELCOME?" MY FRIEND ASSURED THE MAN HE WAS WELCOME. SO HE STAYED FOR WORSHIP, SITTING IN THE VERY FRONT. WHEN THE OFFERING WAS BEING TAKEN AND THE PLATE ARRIVED AT THE MAN, HE DUG IN HIS POCKET RETRIEVING A DAIRY QUEEN GIFT CARD, PASSIONATELY TELLING THE USHER, "THERE IS STILL MONEY LEFT ON THIS CARD. PLEASE GIVE IT TO SOMEONE WHO NEEDS A MEAL."

PERHAPS IT'S TOO MUCH TO IMAGINE THAT A PERSON LIVING ON THE STREETS WOULD EVER INTERRUPT THE DINNER OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES TO ASK A FAVOR, BUT IT IS NOT TOO MUCH TO ASK FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST TO RECOGNIZE THAT THERE ARE NO WALLS...NO WALLS SEPARATING US FROM GOD OR FROM EACH OTHER. STATUS IS A PRODUCT OF OUR OWN IMAGINATIONS, INVISIBLE TO GOD. WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE TO FOLLOW IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS WHO LISTENS TO THE URGENT CHALLENGE OF THE OTHER? WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE TO INSIST ON GOOD NEWS FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T LOOK, SPEAK, OR WORSHIP LIKE WE DO? BE OPENED. BE OPENED TO THE TRUTH THAT GOD ISN'T DONE WITH YOU YET. LET YOUR FAITH GROW AND EVOLVE. BE OPENED TO THE WISDOM OF PEOPLE WHO ARE NOTHING LIKE YOU. BE OPENED TO THE VOICE OF GOD SPEAKING FROM PLACES YOU WOULD NEVER EXPECT. BE OPENED TO THE GOOD NEWS THAT STRETCHES YOUR CAPACITY TO LOVE. BE OPENED.