

Jesus and the Other



Mark 7:27 "(Then Jesus) said to (the Syro-Phoenician woman),
'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the
children's food and throw it to the dogs.'"

At the historic church where I once served in Portsmouth, Virginia, there was an old colonial cemetery attached to the parish, a graveyard full of wonderful old stories from the long and remarkable life of that congregation. One of the stories that I loved most was about a man who in Revolutionary times had lived a wild and wicked life; it was said that he was too much in love with women, with gambling, and with the bottle. When he died therefore the strait-laced priest in the parish fresh from Scotland refused to allow the man to be buried in the 'holy

ground' of the churchyard, the town's only cemetery at the time. As far as this Calvinist minister was concerned, the consecrated grounds within the churchyard were only for the good and upstanding Christian folk in town; it was a sacred space, not to be defiled by the likes of him. So, the man was buried instead just outside the church fence, in the place traditionally reserved for sinners.

Years later, long after that strait-laced priest had moved on, the sinner's granddaughter, having heard the stories, came to the churchyard to pay her respects to her grandfather and to lay flowers upon his grave. Though she looked and looked and looked for his grave marker outside the fence, she couldn't find it anywhere. Finally in frustration, she went over to the old sexton of the parish and asked him if he knew what had become of her grandfather's plot. The sexton then dutifully led her straight to the grave --- now inside the church fence. The woman was horrified and indignant, and demanded to know why her grandfather's grave had been moved, why his mortal remains had been tampered with. How dare the self-righteous members of that congregation disturb his final resting place? She was furious! The caretaker finally replied, "Ma'am, ma'am, we didn't move your grandfather's grave. We moved the fence. The Church isn't a hotel for saints, but a hospital for sinners. We care for all

those buried here, and so we moved the fence to include your grandfather.”

Few New Testament stories prove as disturbing to me as today’s gospel, with its description of Jesus’ encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (known as the Canaanite woman in Matthew’s re-telling of the story). In this Gospel lesson, Jesus surprises me by his lack of care, by his narrow-mindedness and cruelty, and his outright disregard to this desperate woman’s pleadings for her sick daughter. But if we read the story carefully, we will, I think, see a change in Jesus, that highlights how being really faithful to God’s call sometimes takes us out of ourselves and out of our comfort zones, and far beyond our own imagined boundaries. It is possible that Jesus here is showing us how to move the fence.

Before today’s story Jesus has been surrounded by throngs of people wherever he has gone. People were everywhere seeking his healing touch without any true understanding of what he is preaching about. His own disciples seem just as confused as everyone else about his teachings. None of them seem to get it. Meanwhile, the Pharisees and the scribes from Jerusalem have just come out to argue with and accuse Jesus, and then taking offense at his responses, his failing to respect the tradition

of the elders, like in last week's Gospel. And so, in today's story, Jesus is just trying to get away from it all for a while.

Having just returned from vacation, I well understand Jesus' need and desire to take a break. So, Jesus headed out to the farthest northwest borders of Israel, towards Tyre and Sidon, towards Gentile territory, where he entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there, and yet, we are told, that he could not escape notice. For suddenly he is approached by this foreigner, this woman crying out for him to heal her daughter who is tormented by a demon. The woman bows down at Jesus feet and begs him to help. Matthew's version tells us that Jesus' disciples urged him to send her away, for she keeps shouting after us! She is persistent. Jesus just seems tired and a bit angry about it all, and wants to just be left alone!

For Jesus seems to draw a protective line, a boundary, a fence. He has just retreated from an angry confrontation with official Israel only to run into this woman who wears the label of Israel's most notorious adversary - Canaan. In every way possibly imaginable, this woman represents the "Other" for Jesus. She is a woman, in a society where women are to be seen and not hear; she is a foreigner, an alien in the land of Israel; she is not a Jew, but she's a Gentile, not a friend, but an enemy of the state. And so, Jesus at first ignores her pleas. When she is unrelenting, "(Jesus) replies, 'I was sent only to

the lost sheep of the house of Israel;'" not to you and not to your kind. I was sent only to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel', the exact same phrase Jesus used earlier when he sent his twelve disciples out into the villages ahead of him, when he gave the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:5-6).

Surprisingly perhaps, the known contacts of Jesus during his earthly ministry were almost exclusively confined to his own people, to the Jews. Remarkably, there are only three stories of Jesus encountering Gentiles in all of the Gospels until his appearance before Pilate, namely, with the Greeks who approached Philip wanting to speak to Jesus (Jn. 12:21), the Roman centurion whose slave was dying (Mt. 8:5; Lk. 7:2), and this Canaanite or Syro-Phoenician woman. And in all three of these stories, there is a certain obvious reluctance or resistance by Jesus to making contact with the 'other'.

In today's story at first, Jesus ignores this Canaanite woman's cries. Then he callously responds, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," and that is the end of that he thinks. But this stranger would not take "no" for an answer. "Nevertheless, she persisted." She --- an outsider, a woman, a despised foreigner --- reminds Jesus that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" and

thus forces Jesus to reconsider his boundaries; and something in Jesus gives way. The line he had drawn between himself and the woman disappears; the limits he had placed on himself suddenly vanish right before our eyes, Jesus' understanding of his own mission is broadened here. He is no longer called only to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel,' but now to Jews and Gentiles alike, to all those who believe in him. In Matthew's version, Jesus responds to her, "'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly." And our world has never been the same since.

So, who are the Syro-Phoenicians among us today? Who are the persistent whiners that we like his disciples would urge Jesus to just send away? You know the ones I mean, 'those people,' the ones that hold different political views than we hold, or are in a different socio-economic class than we are, or who simply don't look like we do, who do not believe what we believe, who speak a different language. Who are the 'others' in the life of this congregation whom we do not really welcome into our fellowship? Where have we drawn the line? Where are our fences? My brothers and sisters, do we with our acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, as James asks of us today?

Where else have we as a community consciously or unconsciously fenced people out, leaving our town to be pretty monochromatic? What messages do we send, what gates and barriers have we put up that, knowingly or unknowingly, to the "Others," to the ones who are different from us, the Syro-Phoenicians in our midst, that say we don't really want anything to do with you, so that we just keep on building up our fences, stone upon stone upon stone, failing to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And sadly, some people think that fences will keep us safe, will keep out the 'Other' and will preserve 'our' way of life. But God keeps moving fences. Over and over and over again, God calls us to push against old boundaries, to embrace sinners and tax collectors, the marginalized, the widows and orphans, the lepers and outcasts in our community, even to let in the uncircumcised. We may resist this; we may make snide remarks of disapproval about 'those' people, indeed we do, we often shame, blame or criticize them, perhaps in the hopes that the "Others" will get the 'message,' will simply go away on their own; we may even get sick and tired of it all, just as Jesus did, but the call of God keeps on after us, until finally we step out of our comfort zones and over the lines we have drawn for ourselves and move the fence, discovering a whole new world on the other side.

Think about where and with whom we begin to feel uncomfortable, or feel disdain, or just shake your head in

disgust, and we will find our fences there. We need pay attention to our anxieties and our fears and our own prejudices! And then we need to let go of them! We need to step out! We need to trust God. And look for the ways in which God's grace can move us beyond that fence. For just as with Jesus, we are called to step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves, not because we want to, or even because we need to, but because God is calling us to. AMEN