

Speaking With the Little People Mark 7:24-37

I'm breaking my habit of asking strangers, "What do you do? As if they're no more than what they do.

I've begun asking

"What are your dreams and your dreads?"

"What moves you excites you, alarms you?"

"What drains you or sustains you?"

"What interests or bores you, amuses or grieves you?"

"Where do you go when you're homesick?"

"Where do you rest when you're tired?"

"Who are you when you're alone, and whom do you miss?"

"And who misses you?"

But when were dealing with questions,

Perhaps it's not really what

Or where,

Or who,

But whose.

Whose are you?

And whose am I?

(Gerhard Frost) *Journey of the Heart*

Both of the Markan stories appointed for this week take place in the land of the Gentiles. Today's story is an incredible symbol of the breaking down of false barriers for the sake of God's mission. Jesus breaks all kinds of barriers in this story .

He breaks down geographical barriers by moving into Gentile lands. He breaks down ethnic barriers in his dealings with a woman. He breaks down sexual barriers as well. It was a radical thing for Jesus to encounter a woman the way he does in the story. The heavens have been opened and God is loose in the world in Jesus Christ breaking down all kinds of barriers to create a people for himself.

The Syrophenician woman is desperate. Like other desperate people in Mark's story she throws herself at Jesus' feet. She comes on behalf of her daughter who is possessed by a demon. Jesus' answer to the woman is one of the most shocking words ever to come forth from his mouth. "Let the children be fed first," Jesus says to the woman, for it's not fair to take the children's food and give it to the dogs" Bible commentators do back flips to get around those harsh words, but the words stand. Jesus clearly sees his ministry as a ministry to the children (people of Israel) first and only later to the dogs (Gentiles). St. Paul says the same thing about his ministry "The Gospel, he writes... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" *Romans (1:16)*

The woman is not put off by Jesus' rebuke. She comes right back at him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It's almost as if this foreign woman is

giving Jesus a theology lesson! This is certainly the most striking feature of this story. A gentile woman teaches Jesus. If nothing else this story should remove from us any form of arrogance. People whom we encounter with the Gospel may also have things to teach us. They are not necessarily strangers to God after all. Paul said of the Gentiles, “They show that what the Law requires is written on their hearts” (Romans 2:15)

The Syrophenician woman is one of the little people in Mark’s Gospel who are presented to us as people of faith. These little people in Mark’s story have consistent traits which they share in common:

a child like, often persistent, faith;
a disregard for personal status and power;
and a capacity for sacrificial service.
They are the little ones who have faith

While we are still on the land of the Gentiles, “they brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.” The Syrophenician woman brought her daughter to Jesus. Some unnamed persons bring a man who is deaf to Jesus. There are other instances where unidentified persons bring someone to Jesus to be cured. The stories demonstrate the results of faith, though it is not the faith of the sick that is the focus of attention. And the focus of that faith is Jesus.

Mark is teaching us something here about the communal nature of faith. We normally talk about the faith of individuals. The Bible wants us to be cognizant of the communal nature of faith. Believing in Jesus we bring people to him in prayer, and we bring people with us to celebrate his strong reality of love in our lives, including the smallest of our children.

In Mark there are several unnamed women who demonstrate amazing faith in God. They are quite something special, special in a world that thought them to be so non-special that they are not even named!

Remember the woman with the flow of blood that made her unclean, and that had lasted for 12 years. She was desperate. But she knew something special. She believed that all she had to do was touch the hem of Jesus’ garment and she would be healed. She touched! Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. She is one of the “little people” we first hear about in the Gospel. She is an unnamed woman with unusual insight into the ministry of Jesus.

In the Gospel for today the woman is also unnamed. She has grasped the nature of Jesus ministry so well that she proceeds to teach him that he ought to be reaching out to the gentiles. She accepts Jesus statement that the Jews are first. But she also uses the humiliating epitaph that even there the crumbs fall to the dogs. And you and I are the recipients of that as Gentiles. This aspect of the story is simply incredible. An unnamed woman teaches Jesus!

Then there is the unnamed woman in Mark 14:3-9. Like the Syrophenician woman, she has special insight; it seems, into the nature of Jesus' ministry. This story, each of these unnamed women stories, stands in clear contrast to the disciples who never understand anything!

When we come to Mark 8 we will begin to deal with the clearest stories of the disciples who don't get it. Jesus will tell them three times that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer many things, be rejected, killed and raised to new life. Jesus reveals to his disciples the world of suffering that awaits his ministry. He calls upon them to take up their cross and follow him into suffering. But the disciples never get the point! They keep seeing "glory" as their destiny.

Returning to the story in Mark 14 we understand that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to die. The disciples don't get it. And unnamed woman, however, does get it! She breaks open an alabaster jar of ointment and pours it over Jesus' head. People are indignant with this woman. Jesus steps in to rescue the woman and to say of her deed: "she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mark 14:8-9). This unnamed woman has grasped the nature of Jesus' journey to the cross. She has anointed him for burial. She is most certainly a woman of great faith.

The irony of her story, of course, is that the story that will be told in remembrance of her is a story that does not remember her name! She is simply one of the "little people" in Mark's Gospel (Mark 14:8-9) who evidence great faith. The unnamed status of women will end with the coming of the Christian community. In Baptism women are named! Christian baptism is the only initiation rite in all the world's religions that is the same for men and women! Women shall be no more unnamed among us.

We don't always know who the little people of great faith are in our midst. We don't know how the Gospel is taking root in their lives. Therefore in the Christian community, we must treat all people with dignity. Jesus calls upon us to listen to the "little people." The way of life in the Christian community (listening to the little people) is not the way the world works.

With Jesus the Christ the New Creation has begun. It comes by God's power & grace, not by our actions, and it can come quietly. It is universal, for all creation, first (and through) the house of Israel but for all, even we, who like dogs, also receive the children's bread, at this point Jesus was not seeking out the Gentiles, but wherever he goes, it is as though the new creation cannot not break in, or break out.

Understanding Jesus; who he is as Creator-Redeemer (and not simply a faith healer) is crucial. But even more important is receiving Jesus in the humility of faith, saved by grace, and knowing that our greatest healing, already accomplished and present in our lives, comes through the forgiveness of sins and the first fruits of the new creation, even as we anticipate the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.

And a mark that we believe that is mentioned by what the faith community does as said in James. (Read Epistle)

Assignment: Greet a person you don't know and find out their name.

Joy in the Christ Life! David E. Hinck, Pastor...

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