

A sermon preached at Morningside United Church on Mark 7:24-31

One Sunday morning a few years ago while preaching at a church I was serving I told the congregation about an experience I had several years earlier. I had been involved in a hit and run automobile accident in which my car was propelled across 4 lanes of traffic, hit a panel van, went flying back across the 4 lanes of traffic, careened off an embankment and struck a tree. I told them how time had stood still and how my life had passed before my eyes. I had reached the most dramatic moment in my story. In the most serious tone of voice I could muster I said, "I thought to myself, 'today is the day I'm going to die.'" Suddenly from the center of the congregation came a roar of laughter as if I had just told the world's funniest joke. It came from Dick Warner a delightful, if somewhat eccentric gentleman in his 80's whose hearing aid did not always function properly. I've never known whether he didn't hear me properly, or whether what I said actually struck him as funny. His response was puzzling to say the least. And for some it was an embarrassment.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church the Jesus we encounter in this morning's reading from the Gospel of Mark has proved to be both puzzling and an embarrassment, and for much the same reason. Jesus' rude response to the Gentile woman seeking healing for her afflicted daughter doesn't seem to fit the context, or perhaps more accurately, it doesn't seem to fit the man, at least our image of Jesus, the compassionate, gentle, healer. What could Jesus have been thinking to speak in such a manner to someone who so clearly needed acceptance and understanding. And make no mistake about it; his comment was rude. He called her a dog – a derogatory term for Gentiles.

Whenever I hear this passage read I wish I could see Jesus face and hear his tone of voice when he spoke it. It might give us a clue as to what was going on. But all we can do is speculate. Was his voice stern and reprimanding; hostile and condescending? It's hard to believe given all that we do know about Jesus. Did it sound tired and weary? Perhaps.

For days Jesus had been trying to get some time away from the crowds pressing him to heal their many diseases and afflictions. From the beginning Jesus viewed his ministry as one of proclaiming the Kingdom of God by preaching and teaching, but once his healing power had become known that is all that people seemed to want from him. Mark recounts story after story of people healed or exorcised of an evil spirit after an encounter with Jesus. Everywhere he went people sought him out for healing; many just by touching the hem of his garment as he passed through the town square.

In addition to being approached by the afflicted, Jesus was often accosted by those who wanted to argue with him. From the moment Jesus came to public notice, there were religious leaders, usually Pharisees, who sought to discredit him, some, Mark tells us, even plotting his death.

Several times he and the disciples had tried to escape for some rest but to no avail. If he had hoped to get away by travelling into Gentile territory, the appearance of this feisty woman who pushed her way into their retreat was not good news. Perhaps Jesus was just so tired, so frustrated that, like the rest of us human beings, the words were out of his mouth before he'd realized how bad they sounded.

For many it is encouraging to see Jesus' humanity so clearly exhibited; to have the claim that Jesus was "fully human" so concretely expressed. His words to this woman, if said in frustration or exhaustion, reveal not only his human emotions, but also his human limits of understanding, for they reveal his need to grow in

understanding about his own mission. In addition to seeing his mission as primarily one of preaching and teaching the Kingdom of God, Jesus also saw it as a mission to his own people. They were the ones whom God had chosen to be a light to the nations. It was through them that God would bring salvation to the world. But they had lost their way. They had confused law with love and piety with true sacrifice. They had praised God with their lips while dishonoring God with their actions and their lives. Jesus, like the prophets of ancient Israel, preached a message of repentance, of turning back to God and God's ways so that Israel could fulfill its high calling as God's people in the world.

Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus had pushed the boundaries of conventional faith when he proclaimed to the Pharisees, who had been criticizing him for ignoring purity laws, that it isn't what touches a person that harms their relationship with God, only what comes from them. Now, in a reversal of roles, he is being challenged to rethink the scope of his mission by this unnamed woman whose love for her daughter propelled her to push beyond the boundaries of what was proper for a Gentile woman – speaking to a man to whom she was not related. “Okay, I won't argue with you about the children getting their food first, but even the house pets get to eat the scraps that fall from the table, don't they?” Using his own words against him, this woman of great courage and ingenuity as well as compassion refused to take no for an answer, refused to let her hope be killed, refused to give up, and in refusing she taught Jesus something about himself and about his mission. Her efforts were rewarded with the healing of her daughter. Mark is not embarrassed by a Jesus who can learn and grow.

I wonder if there are people we need to hear from - people outside the boundaries of these walls who won't take no for answer, who refuse to let hope die, who haven't yet completely given up on the Body of Christ to heal and make whole? I wonder if they will have the courage to enter our place of retreat and upset us and I wonder, if like Jesus, we will, despite being overworked and tired and sometimes frustrated, let them in and engage with them? Will we allow who we are and the way we do things to be challenged by the claims of those come seeking Christ's touch?

Yes, perhaps Jesus was just being human. But with any difficult passage there is always more than one theory. There is another theory about what was going on in Jesus' retort to the Syro-Phoenician woman, as she has come to be known. It may just be that Jesus was challenging this woman to discover whether or not she really understood what he was about. Too often Jesus' deeper message of restored relationship between human beings and their God was lost on those who came for the quick fix, the easy path, the relief of the immediate problem without attention to the deeper underlying brokenness in our world. The countryside was full of sorcerers, magicians and others who offered such quick fixes and Jesus could easily have been perceived as simply a magician practicing the “healing arts.” This may account for his request to those he healed to keep it a secret.

Earlier in the Gospel of Mark a strange conversation takes place between Jesus and his disciples. They are questioning him about his use of parables. Jesus' replies, “To you the secret of the Kingdom of God has been given, but to those who are outside, everything comes by way of parables, so that (as scripture says) they may look but not perceive; they may listen but not

understand: otherwise they might turn to God and be forgiven.” He then goes on to tell the parable of the sower whose seeds fall on different kinds of soil where some take root and others do not. Jesus, spoke in parables so that people would not understand? Jesus didn’t want people to turn to God and be forgiven?

Even more than the passage from today’s Gospel this passage from Mark 4 proved so embarrassing that Matthew, whose Gospel is based on Mark, changed the wording. It is a slight change but the change in meaning enormous. Instead of saying that Jesus spoke in Parables so that people would not understand, Matthew’s wording has Jesus speaking in parables so that people would understand.

I’m sure most of us would prefer Matthew’s version. But before we write Mark off it may just be that he is trying to tell us something that we in this fast food, quick fix culture need to hear. As Biblical Scholar Tom Long points out, Mark, perhaps more than any other New Testament writer knew that it was possible to come to Jesus too quickly; that it was possible to embrace the Gospel of Jesus too early. Mark knew that people who embraced Jesus too quickly often ended up misunderstanding him. Those who came to the Gospel too early, ended up swimming around on the surface, and Mark wants us to go deeper, much deeper.

George Buttrick, the great American preacher, pastor and scholar tells a story of an encounter he had on an airplane returning from a conference. He was furiously working on his sermon for the next Sunday. The man in the seat next to him couldn’t help but notice and finally leaned over and said, “Excuse me for interrupting but I couldn’t help but notice how hard you are working. What are you working on?” Buttrick replied that he was a Christian minister and that he was working on his sermon for the coming Sunday. “Oh religion,” quipped the man, “I don’t like to get caught up in the complexities of religion. I like things simple – ‘do unto others,’ you know, the Golden Rule – that’s my religion.” Buttrick didn’t argue with him; he just asked what the man did for a living. “

“I’m an astronomer, I teach at the University.”

“Astronomer,” said Buttrick, “I don’t like to get caught up in the complexity of astronomy. I like to keep things simple, Twinkle, twinkle, little star....”

Mark wants us to go deeper, deeper in our spiritual life, deeper in our relationship with God, deeper where we will discover the true power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am reminded of a quote by Author, Annie Dillard from her book **Teaching a Stone to Talk:**

*On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.*

It’s true Jesus may simply have been tired and overworked. But its just possible that he was testing the Syro-Phoenician woman to see if she really

understood what he was about. How about us? Do we really understand what Jesus was about?