

The Unexpected Trajectories of Life

Mark 7:24-31

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An Unusual Exchange

Today's Gospel Reading on the Syro-Phoenician Woman represents a foray by Jesus out of his home region in the Galilee and into foreign territory. He has been having great success as a healer. But now he is laying low, trying to take a break from dealing with the crowds.

The exchange between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician Woman is a very curious one, because it doesn't fit into our usual way of thinking about Jesus. We usually stress his divine nature, as unfailingly caring and availability and as always as being the one who opens the eyes of others.

Yet, in this story it appears as though it is the other way around. Jesus's first response to this woman, who has bowed reverently before him, clearly comes across as painfully harsh and insensitive. I don't see any other way to put it. He tells her flat out that she will have to wait, because his first responsibility is to help his own people. He tells her that has the value of a dog in comparison to them.

It is like a slap in the face to a woman who is already desperate. But the humility and faithfulness that comes across in what she says next, brings a sudden turnabout in his demeanor. He softens, and extends to her daughter the healing she desperately seeks.

Wrestling with God

In some ways this story is like a New Testament version of Jacob Wrestling with the angel of God at the River. It is an example for us of someone who has the courage to wrestle with God for a blessing. Here is a woman who is not going to accept her daughter's fate without arguing her case as best she can.

If you think about the reading this way, I think that Jesus's initial reaction is less perplexing. There are many who have experienced life as though it were slap in the face; a rejection of who they are and of those they hold dear. And so, if there is to be a blessing to be attained, they have to struggle for it.

I can't help thinking of those Afghans who were turned away at the airport because, treated as less worthy of saving because they did not hold US passports. In our relief over ending that war, we will soon

forget them, and I fear that this is so because we don't really think an Afghan life has the value that we ascribe to our own.

In any case, I think we can all identify with the Syro-Phoenician woman in some way, because as privileged as we are, we all know something about what it is like to be overlooked or dismissed as unimportant.

And so, perhaps what is more important in this story, is not the initial insult, but that Jesus does respond to the Syro-Phoenician woman's "Hail Mary" and extends to her the blessing she so desperately seeks. In hindsight the story becomes an encouragement to us not to give up too easily, but to keep contending with God until the blessing is given.

A New Trajectory

The second remarkable development in the story has to do with the fact that it is the Syro-Phoenician woman who appears to open Jesus's eyes and not the other way around. Or perhaps it is possible that she speeds him to a conclusion that he is already considering, because after their encounter, Jesus's own journey takes a new trajectory. Instead of heading back toward home territory as you might expect, he goes

deeper into gentile territory, where he performs another healing that is very likely of a gentile man.

Today's story marks an important moment of transition in the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus veers away from ministering exclusively to his Jewish brothers and sisters and begins a broader ministry of healing that goes beyond the boundaries of their common faith. It seems that Jesus's encounter with the woman has finally put to rest for him the idea that it is ok to treat gentiles as creatures of secondary importance in their times of need.

Perhaps you could think of Jesus as being sort of like a minister visiting a nursing home, for example, Buckley. At every visit he or she walks past scores of rooms until she comes to the two or three that contain people from the congregation. The minister knows that there are many living there who never get visited. (I know this, because I used to visit Buckley regularly and each time I logged in, I saw the visitors list).

One day while passing by a room the minister hears a person cry out "Are you coming to see me? Nobody visits me." It is not a congregation member or anyone connected to it, as far as she can see. What will she do?

The same could be said about Jesus's situation. Up to this point in his ministry, Jesus had been taking care of his own, "the lost sheep of Israel." But the reality was then, and is now, that desperate need isn't something that exists only among the people we have accepted primary responsibility for. And knowing this, we recognize that there is something unacceptable about showing this kind of partiality. It is like being a horse with blinders.

A Zig Zag Journey

But what would happen if, knowing this, we were to ignore these blinders and suddenly veer off of our habitual course and take a different route, stop in at a new location or enter a different room and visited with someone who we wouldn't necessarily be considered responsible for?

One of the interesting things about Jesus's journey through life is that, when you look more closely at the route he took, you find that it is not as straightforward as you might imagine. There is even something zig-zaggy and disconnected about it. And this gives fits to seminary students who are trying to map out his footsteps.

When we think of the successful life, I think most of us would think of something more orderly and predictable. We would think of a journey that carries us through life, as though we were on a train line that makes all the right stops, fulfilling all our original bucket list of hopes and dreams along the way to our desired destination.

But this is not what we see in Jesus's ministry. It is true that there is a general movement that carries him through his ministry in the Galilee to his final journey to Jerusalem, the cross and resurrection. But other parts of his route seem rather puzzling and random, more like the course taken by a boat blown here and there by the wind.

I think that there is something comforting in knowing that the journey of this man, who lived life more fully than any of us, was not tacked out in such a tidy way. I say this because, I think most of us are probably a bit disheartened by how untidy the path of our own lives have taken in retrospect. We see that we have nowhere near followed the straight and efficient course to our goals that we once envisioned. At times it seems that we have been more like boats, tacking in one direction and another, driven here and there by the wind.

And yet this morning's Gospel helps us to see that there is something beautiful hidden within Jesus's seemingly erratic course through life - that there are moments of conversation and discovery, like Jesus's conversation with the Syro-Phoenician woman, that open our eyes to a deeper understanding of reality and our purpose in it. And, in those moments, we know that a change of course is in order and we take a new and perhaps unexpected tack.

Yet when we look back on it all and on where we are now, as this unique gathering of people; as this family of faith, celebrating the illustrious ministry of two in our midst, it does not seem to me that our lives have taken a random or irrational course at all. Instead it seems that, through some deep and unfathomable design, God has led us to where we should be, closer to the final revelation in which it will all have been more than worth it and we will all celebrate as one in God's heavenly banquet.