

Keeping Tension Alive

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Proverbs 22.1-2, 8-9, 22-23,
Psalm 125,
James 2.1-17,
Mark 7.24-37

Do you remember the first time you encountered the humanity of Jesus? That may sound like a strange question if you weren't raised in the church. But many of us who were and especially those of us who went to Sunday School were taught certainly that Jesus was a human being but the emphasis was always on the ways that Jesus was like God. So to read a text like this one where Jesus is so rude, well it's a bit jarring. This woman, desperate to find help for her daughter, throws herself at Jesus and is dismissed with an insult to boot.

Commentators through the years have been so uncomfortable by the thought that Jesus might have spoken out of prejudice or frustration or exhaustion. They have done gymnastics explaining how this exchange was anything but dismissive and rude. They say things like: "the term for dog in his culture isn't as rude as it sounds to us." Or taking a more theological bent: "Jesus was unwilling to be distracted from his primary calling which was to bring the good news to the Jewish community. While that message eventually makes its way to the Gentiles the time was not right for that part of the mission to begin."

It's been the feminist theologians of the last couple of decades who have been willing to lift up what Mark was comfortable revealing about Jesus: that he was a human being who grew in his knowledge and understanding over time. Luke tells us at the end of chapter 2 after Jesus was found as a boy in the temple that Jesus increased in wisdom and in years.¹ I don't know about you but my learning curve didn't end with adolescence. In fact, I learned some things this week that opened my eyes. What we see in this text is one of those moments when Jesus' eyes were opened.

¹ Luke 2.52

It isn't so remarkable that Jesus continues to grow in wisdom. What I find remarkable is how willing Jesus is to have his mind opened. He isn't defensive. He doesn't dig in his heels to save face in front of her. I get the impression that Jesus might have smiled at your retort. First of all it's kind of witty. She doesn't accuse him of prejudice or hypocrisy. She just stays right there with him: "you can call me a dog if you want to but even the dogs get the crumbs from the children's table." There's banter in their conversation and Jesus accepts her correction and he praises her and blesses her for it.

Mark invites us in this moment to watch the interplay and tension between Jesus' humanity and divinity. One commentator plays with this word "Ephphatha" from the second healing story which means to be opened. He claims that what is shown here in Mark is an *Ephphatha Christology* by which he means that "Jesus is fully God and fully human only if he can faithfully "be opened" to both at the same time."² That's where so many of us get stuck. When the limitations of our human ways of seeing are challenged by a wider view, we don't receive it as a gift of divine wisdom. We dig in our heels and defend our position. We refuse to be opened and to live in the tension.

There are multiple points of tension in these texts today. James and Proverbs both speak to the issue of social justice. Both address the ways that the rich of society are treated with partiality and how the privilege of wealth inflicts suffering on the poor. Without this voice standing up against the powerful of our society, demanding justice, and agitating for change - the privilege of the powerful will take precedence over the suffering of the powerless. When you listen to the rhetoric of justice it is powerful in its ability to convict your soul. It trades on the contrast between our lofty ideals and painful reality of our behavior. Advocates of social justice are truth tellers who are not afraid of offending you if that offense will trigger a response of action from you to stand up for what is right. There is a strong sense of righteousness that motivates those who stand for justice. Just listen to the book of James and Proverbs today.

I have noticed something else as well. When I travel in social justice circles and when I am myself in that mode, there is this edge where standing up for what is right borders on self-righteousness and where a sense of justice

² Ashton, Loye Bradley, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 48.

can descend into judgmentalism. Have you noticed that before? It seems to be a danger that goes with the territory. James acknowledges in an indirect way that danger here. He begins and ends this passage calling for justice for those who are poor and suffering. But in the middle of the passage he speaks of mercy. After all, none of us can hold up the full weight of the law and the call of justice by ourselves. All of us depend on people's mercy or on the mercy of God for the times when we fail.

There is no question: we need the people who stand for God's justice. We need people who stir our anger when the powerful oppress the vulnerable and hold us to high standards. We need people who keep us honest about what we can do and propel us into action to support the liberation of the poor. AND we need the voice of those who speak of God's mercy. We need people who push us to grow in faith and develop our capacity for compassion and forgiveness. We need people who propel us to release our anger and find ways to live in peace. I love the image in an old Susan Ashton song when she sings of "mercy smoothing the furrowed brow of justice."

That's one way to read what the Syrophenician woman does with Jesus. She doesn't contradict Jesus when he talks about what is fair regarding his mission to the Jews. Jesus is using the language of justice here. What she does is invite Jesus to hold in tension what is fair and right and just with the mercy and compassion she is seeking. We need to keep the tension alive between these two poles. Just as we talked about it in relation to Jesus' humanity and divinity, James speaks of it in relation to justice and mercy....faith and works.

If you were present on August 10th at our multicultural diversity event you may remember Kay Hubbard and Linda McFadden speaking to us about some research by Barry Johnson in the field of organizational development. He has come to discover that there are many of these polarities, as he calls them, that exist in life. In fact he first noted this dynamic of equally important seemingly contradictory ideas in these theological concepts from Judaism and Christianity.³ It's a never a question of choosing one over the other but rather a task of managing the tension between the two.

³ This definition comes from an article by Barry Johnson entitled *Polarity Management: A Summary Introduction*.

James gives us a perfect example when he brings up the royal law to love your neighbor as you love yourself. So which is it? Love myself or love my neighbor? Well, of course, it's both. If you let go of one pole and no longer concern yourself with your neighbor - if you just take care of yourself and you camp out over here where it is all about you....you know how damaging someone can be who has spiraled into the down side of self-love. It is equally damaging to let go of self-care and camp out over here where it's all about other people. It's hard work holding up both ends because a lot of us are drawn to one side or the other.

I saw the movie *The Soloist* this week on DVD. It provided a wonderful narrative exploration of these dynamics we've been talking about today. The movie is about Steven Lopez, a journalist for the LA Times, who becomes friends with Nathaniel Ayers who is a homeless, schizophrenic, drop out of Julliard. It's so interesting to watch Steven's sense of justice come to life. He becomes a real crusader addressing poverty and homelessness in his city. You also watch him descend into self-righteousness and become incredibly condescending to Nathaniel when he cannot let go of his sense of what is right. There's a beautiful moment in the film after a pretty intense confrontation between the two when Steven begins to realize that there is more to life than standing for what is right. There are these gifts available over here in the realm of mercy -things like compassion, understanding, and mutuality. A real friendship develops between the two men as he learns to live out of both realms - out of justice and mercy - a friendship that utterly transforms both of them.

Most of us have been schooled in the art of resolving tension...the Word of God today is inviting us to keep the tension alive. It might be an uncomfortable place to live but it is a place with the power to transform us; a place where we can be opened by God's Spirit to receive the gifts of divine wisdom.

So let's keep the tension alive.