

“People of Faith = People of Action” (Part 1)

OT 23B-18

James 2: 1-10, 14-17

Mark 7: 24-37

Rev. Rob Carter

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It just might be the most offensive story in all the Gospels. In fact, it’s so offensive—it so flies in the face of what we expect from Jesus—that, across the centuries, scholars have twisted themselves into all sorts of contortions trying to somehow make it seem less offensive. As if Jesus didn’t call a terrified, desperate mother a dog. But he did. He called her a dog, right to her face!

While there may or may not be a redeeming reason behind what he said, let’s make no mistake. It’s the stuff of prejudice. It’s the stuff of exclusivity. And it’s the stuff of status quo—willingly abiding by the dividing walls of society rather than the kingdom work of tearing them down. But thankfully, thankfully, the story doesn’t end as it begins, as Jesus ends up not just tearing down the dividing walls between himself, a Jewish man, and the mother, a Gentile woman... he obliterates the dividing wall into a million little pieces.

Which really is saying something. Remember, the divisions between Jesus and this woman were actually as big and old as the people Israel itself. Jews and Gentiles didn’t get along. The Hebrews considered Gentiles to be impure. Unclean. Gentiles not only lived beyond the land of Israel, they also lived beyond the Jewish law of the Torah... the law every good Hebrew kept in order to live in a proper relationship with God. So as many Hebrews understood it, Gentiles simply didn’t live in relationship to God. Which made them... unclean. Impure. Less than. So best not to intermingle with the dirty Gentiles. Best to stay away.

Yet, as Mark tells it, Jesus and his disciples had just left the Hebrew territories of Galilee and entered a region called Tyre. A significant transition because... well, Tyre is a Gentile territory. Evidently, Jesus went there trying to escape the Hebrew crowds to get a little r and r. Mark says he eventually entered a home, hoping no one would find him there.

Except... as always happened to Jesus... rest couldn’t be found. Even the Gentiles—living beyond the land of Israel and beyond the law of the Torah—even they had come to hear about this miracle-making prophet of Israel who could heal the sick and cure the lame.

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Mark says it was there, in Tyre, that a woman—a Gentile woman—approached him, and began pleading with him to save her daughter.

Now, before we get to the woman’s request, I ask that you keep in mind that not only is she a Gentile approaching Jesus... she’s also, obviously... a woman approaching Jesus. And women—Jew or Gentile—were not supposed to approach men unaccompanied.

But there was no stopping this mother.

“Lord, please, my daughter is sick. A demon has made her so sick. Please, Lord, save my little girl!”

“Let the children be fed first,” Jesus replied, “for it’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Translation, I’ve come to the children of God—the people of Israel—who are my priority before you Gentiles—you dogs.

Again, Jesus response is offensive, is it not? It’s the stuff of prejudice. It’s the stuff of exclusivity. And it’s the stuff of status quo—abiding by the dividing walls of society rather than the kingdom work of tearing them down.

Maybe, as some have suggested, Jesus was trying to test the woman. Or maybe he was intentionally setting himself up to be corrected by a Gentile woman as a lesson for his disciples to see. Or maybe... just maybe Jesus was simply tired and cranky and just a bit ticked off that even there, in Gentile territory, he couldn’t escape the pleas of people asking something of him.

Regardless, Jesus’ response drew a line in the sane, so to speak. “I’m here,” he told her, “and you’re there. I’m one of these. And you’re one of those. So your problem isn’t my problem,” he said.

The mother persisted. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She didn’t challenge their differences. She didn’t even seem to take offense at an obvious insult. Rather, she kept at it. She kept pursuing the justice and wholeness of the kingdom of God she beheld in Jesus.

Upon hearing her words... upon witnessing her humble but perseverant pursuit of God’s kingdom, Jesus realized just how wrong his first statement had been.

“For saying that, you may go,” he told her. “The demon has left your daughter.”

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And once again, a massive dividing wall of society came tumbling down.

All society ever saw in her daughter was a good-for-nothing Gentile girl possessed by a demon.

All Jesus seemed to hear, at first, was the plea of Gentile woman who lived beyond his immediate concern.

But in the end, compassion won out. In the end, love overflowed. And in the end, the grace of God helped Jesus see the need to tear down that dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles, men and women, the insiders and the outsiders.

So Jesus continued traveling through Gentile territories, heading next to the Decapolis where he healed a deaf Gentile... And from there he went on to teach the people by the thousands... even feeding them when he had so little to offer—just a few loaves and a couple fish.

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Compassion can do that, you know. Compassion can do *all* that! Compassion can build bridges of healing and understanding. Compassion can create highways of help and hope. For compassion is different from sympathy, right? Sympathy is the ability to understand another’s feelings. But compassion... compassion is sympathy plus the desire to help.

I could give you the dictionary definition, but I personally prefer the way the great Presbyterian pastor, Frederich Buechner, put it. “Compassion,” he writes, “is the sometimes

fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin. It's the knowledge that there can never really be peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy for you, too."¹

That's compassion. "It's the knowledge that there can never really be peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy for you, too."

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One of my favorite storytellers, Rev. Fred Craddock, tells of the time he met Barbara Jenkins. He said he'll never forget it. He was at some sort of reception, just standing around, making small talk with others.

And then, (he said), Barbara Jenkins came in. (He noted) there was something about the room that changed when she came in. "Who's Barbara Jenkins?" (Fred asked).

"That's Barbara Jenkins," he was told.

(He learned that) Barbara Jenkins spent her time writing letters, making calls, going and seeing folk to make a difference in the way the law treats juvenile offenders. Night and day, seven days a week she (worried) the authorities to death.

(So Fred asked her,) "Do you enjoy doing all that?"

"Well, not really" (she said).

"You get paid? Are you on salary?"

"No, No No." (she said).

"You have children in trouble with the law and you want..."

"No, no, no."

"Then why in the world do you do it? It's no fun; you're not making any money; none of your friends are doing it."

And she said, "I have to." "I have to.""²

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In our first lesson this morning, James doesn't use the word "compassion." He uses the word "works"—but I think they're interchangeable here. James writes, "What good is it, Christians, if you say you have faith but don't have works? Don't have compassion? If someone is naked and needs food, and you tell them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' but you don't give them clothes to keep warm or food to fill their bellies, then what good have you done? You've done nothing! So faith by itself, if it has no works... is dead. Faith without compassion," he says, "is utterly useless."

And he's right. James is absolutely right. Anybody can mentally assent to theological beliefs, right? We can all sit here and think to ourselves, "Yes... I believe there's a God. Yes, I believe Jesus Christ shows us God's will and way." But if we don't live like it... what good are our thoughts?

God doesn't call us to think the right things. God calls us to love God and others as ourselves. God calls us grow the Kingdom so that all—all—might come to know the bounty of grace and love God has for them.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words* (New York: HarperCollins Inc., 2004) 65.

² Fred B. Craddock, edited by Mike Graces and Richard F. Ward, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) 114.

It's why people of faith simply must be people of action. Or perhaps better said, people of faith must be people of compassion. Those who understand there cannot be peace and joy for us, until there is also peace and joy for... the hurting... the oppressed... the exploited... the silenced... the outcast... the young... the old... the forgotten... the refugee... the immigrant... and even the very ones we've turned away before. Even the very ones who, like Jesus, we initially step away from, perhaps even thankful for the dividing walls of society that keep us separated from them.

For like it or not, the Gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't draw boundaries around those who are welcome and those who aren't—those who God loves and those who God casts aside. Just as the Gospel doesn't permit us to draw lines around people of a different race, a different nationality or citizenship, a different orientation, a different socio-economic bracket, even a different religion.

Rather, as we see in Jesus Christ, who tuned his heart to the least and last around him, we can only truly live our faith if we understand there is no real or lasting peace for any of us until there is, at last, peace for all. It's the way God's kingdom grows. Not by force. Not by indifference or apathy. But through living, tangible acts of compassion. Living, tangible movements of God's people seeking to grow God's kingdom as we seek to grow closer to God, *and* closer to others.

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So here and now, Towson Presbyterian, as we set forth on a new programmatic year, I unabashedly share that I for one can't wait—I cannot wait—to witness what this movement entails for us as we seek to grow closer to God, and closer to others. I cannot wait to see what this movement entails as we taste new aspects of ministry and church life, seeking to live our faith as people of action—people of real compassion—those who set out not to grow the church... but to grow God's kingdom.

People who can relate to one more story I want to share from Fred Craddock—who tells of how, on a number of occasions, he'd wake up in the morning, head downstairs,

...and there'd be a strange, ugly looking, poorly dressed man at the table eating—just eating away, eating away. (Fred said,) "I was scared of him. (So) when he left, I'd say, "Mom, who was that?"

She'd say, "Well, his name was Henry, and he said he was hungry."

"Well, where'd he come from?"

"He came down the railroad tracks."

People called them hobos, Fred said. They walked the tracks begging, maybe stealing, getting what they could to stay alive. They'd stop by our house, and there, sitting in the kitchen eating what we had to eat, just eating it like they'd never have another meal. And Fred would say, "Mama, weren't you scared?"

She said, "He's hungry."

"Well, I was scared of him!"

"Well, he was hungry."³

³ Ibid., 109.