

They Came – Mark 7:24-37

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I've said this many times since the COVID-19 pandemic began a year and a half ago. As we all wondered how we would continue to do worship amid shut-downs and physical distancing, we turned to technology to keep us together.

Regarding our worshiping life, we had to find a way to worship together using tools we had never used before here. And we discovered that pre-recorded and edited videos were the way to go. The question I had, though, was, "How do you do pre-recorded and edited videos?"

We don't have professional videographers on staff, of course. So, I turned to the next best thing: My then-12-year-old-son. Joey knew how to make videos, and, even better, he knew how to edit them and put them on YouTube.

Hence, that's how we had nearly six months-worth of online worship before we had the camera in the sanctuary to livestream our sanctuary service. Amid the somewhat desperation of not knowing what to do, Joey came to our rescue.

It's the kids who often give us hope when adults seem to despair.

There are many unlikely but legitimate sources of truth, hope, and good news today. And as my experience with Joey proved, we overlook or discount them at our own peril.

So often when we read Scripture, we have a tendency to only look for the overarching themes. For a document that was written so long ago, we often think that the details don't apply anymore. To treat this particular passage from Mark in this way, however, would cause us to miss the Good News here—Good News of how a least likely person is able to bring something valuable to the table.

Here in this story, Mark has told us in his introduction that Jesus has come to the Gentile region of Tyre not to preach but to find rest. His primary mission was always to preach to Israel, to the Jews. And so, on this day, he has entered the region of non-Jews—Gentiles—in order to take

a break from a full schedule of teaching and healing. Mark says here in verse 24, “He went into a house and didn’t want anyone to know he was there.”

He was off the clock and needed to get away.

And that would have been easier had it not been for a woman of Syrophenician descent who heard that he was nearby and had come to know of what he had been doing—how he had been making people well.

Again, this woman was not a Jew. She was a Gentile. And she was a Gentile woman. And it was not easy for a Gentile woman to approach a Jewish teacher for help. Yet, the love she has for her daughter, who was in need of being relieved of the powers of a demonic force, gave her the courage to engage Jesus in conversation.

She begs Jesus to throw the demon out of her daughter. And Jesus’ response here is not one of his better moments. “The children have to be fed first,” he says. “It isn’t right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

To her and to our astonishment, Jesus insults this woman. She and her daughter are Gentiles and Jesus uses a racial slur to denigrate them. He describes them as dogs who only eat after the precious children (those in the house of Israel) have been fed. He wasn’t going to heal this girl; he needed rest in order that he could be strong and vibrant and have the energy to heal the people he was really called to heal—his fellow Jews.

This is such a strangely unique tone Jesus takes and is inconsistent with his other healing stories. He usually has no problem with, in fact he seeks out, those who are hurting and have been disadvantaged. But on this day, this Gentile woman, gets more than a cold shoulder. She gets demeaned.

But of course, there is more to the story. After being insulted as she was, the woman’s predictable behavior would have been to slowly slink away in her second-class shame, to accept the place she had once again been put in. She would just go away, enduring the hardship of her daughter’s illness.

Not so fast. This woman has a rebuttal for the ages. “Yeah, I am a dog, Lord” she replies, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs. Even we Gentiles are eligible to be fed.”

And that triggers a 180 degree turn in Jesus. “Good answer,” he says. “Go on home. The demon has left your daughter.”

Something unique and incredible happens to Jesus. We can’t understand it fully, but it appears as if he has been reminded of how God’s incredible gifts are reserved not just for the religious, the righteous, the insiders, the logical. They are reserved for everyone, including those who wouldn’t seem to be likely candidates. Everyone is eligible to be fed, whether you are the so-called children or the dogs.

And it took this woman who was far from the center of religious teaching to get that message across to him again. In his stunning reversal, Jesus acknowledges that the woman’s word has overthrown his own.

How many of today’s “Gentile women,” so to speak, are refusing to back down to the religious establishment today and are instead inserting themselves into a conversation the rest of us might feel they have no right to be part of? Men or women, they might just be people whom we think have no credibility when speaking of God and yet if we just hear what they have to say can bring us new and wonderful insight into the love and mercy of God?

Wouldn’t you all agree that some of the best insight we find into the life of faith and the God who gives us this faith comes from outside the traditional realm of faith? In some ways, it is very true for me. If I’m channel surfing at home and come across a preacher on TV, I usually keep right on going. A few religious books or articles can be especially helpful, but so can the article written expressly from outside the parameter of faith.

Sometimes the wisest insight can come from the least expected source—a co-worker, a neighbor, a person of another faith, a person of no faith at all, a child, a senior in the nursing home, a person with a mental disability, a person from the other side of the tracks, a person of a different color or nationality.

What appears to be Jesus’ stumbling in this story today reminds us that there can be room for and value in every voice. And those voices

speak to us boldly and remind us that everyone is entitled to be fed with the love of God.

And to Jesus' credit, after initially dismissing the Gentile woman's request, he listens to her and finds value in what she says. People like me, in positions of religious authority, are often quick to dismiss those who don't have our pedigree. And that is not only arrogant, but a brazen disregard for the talents and wisdom inherent in all of God's children.

All of this is to say that God speaks to us through people we wouldn't expect sometimes, which in turn leads us down paths we wouldn't expect. Jesus didn't expect to have his mind changed. And neither do we expect to often times be blessed with God's lesson of abundance for all by people we wouldn't have dreamed of engaging.

John Henry Cardinal Newman reflected on the wisdom of the seemingly strange ways in which God leads us in his "Meditation on the Creator":

"God knows what is my greatest happiness, but I do not. There is no rule about what is happy and good, what suits one would not suit another. And the ways by which perfection is reached vary very much ... Thus God leads us by strange ways; we know he wills our happiness, but we neither know what our happiness is, nor the way.

"Let us put ourselves into his hands, and not be startled though he leads us by a strange way ... Let us be sure he will lead us right, that he will bring us to that which is, not indeed what we think best, nor what is best for another, but what is best for us."

When we allow room for the unlikely voices, who take us down unlikely paths, God indeed can lead us to a place that is best for us.

Jesus found the Gentile woman's response to him striking. And so should we.

The second half of the text from Mark today tells the story of what happened after Jesus' encounter with the Gentile woman. He then has brought to him a man who was deaf and who had a speech impediment. And privately, Jesus heals this man of his ailments.

Why did he do this? Well, he had compassion for him, of course. It was his nature. But one has to wonder about the influence the Gentile

woman had on Jesus' decision to do what he does for this guy. Without her prompting him and prodding him to think differently about who is worthy of mercy, maybe Jesus doesn't bring healing to this man. She maybe influenced him just enough that he didn't pass by this guy, but stopped and changed his life.

That's the thing about people whom we would usually consider outside of our realm of influence but who indeed do influence us: Their impact is often lasting and leads us to new ways of thinking and doing.

The Gentile woman may not only have changed the life of her daughter, but she may also have prompted the dramatic turn of events in the deaf man's journey.

Jesus, of course, was divine in all his splendidness. But he was as human as you and me, too. And his trajectory of who he blessed was changed by the people who came to him.

Be on guard for the people who come to you—either with selfish or nefarious motives, or with a perspective that might just change your life for the better.