

Highlander Singers, Jesus-Challengers and Outrageous Street Dancers

Mark 7: 24-30

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Rev. Rebecca Voelkel

Holy One, breaker of human rules, rupturer of that which is seemly, creator of New Heavens and New Earths, pour your Spirit upon us here and now. Touch my mouth and all of our hearts that the words about to be spoken and the words about to be heard might be your Word. Amen.

The building was fairly remote-- at least it is in my mind's eye. It sits on 106 acres of land in the mountains of Tennessee, set amidst trees. It was built in the 1930's. It was first home to classrooms for folks struggling to form a labor movement. But on this night in the 1950's, it housed a group of mostly African American and some other folks, learning the techniques of non-violent direct action in preparation for sit-ins across the Deep South. They were mostly young people sitting at desks and tables, studying and talking, making plans to help transform racist laws using their bodies and their lives.

[pause]

She knew what they thought of someone like her. She was meant to be silent, to keep her distance, to ensure that their purity was held intact by avoiding contact with her.

She was a Syrophoenician, a gentile, they were Jewish, observant, law-abiding. She was the repository into which they cast all that was unclean-- woman, non-Jewish, eater of dirty foods, toucher of impure things.

She knew all this, but she didn't have the luxury of keeping silent. She couldn't afford to be appropriate. She couldn't wait any longer. Her daughter was sick, the flesh of her flesh was dying. And so, on this night, she opened the door of the place where they said she wasn't supposed to be, and she went in.

[pause]

As the sun went down on the Tennessee mountains, the smell of the settling dew came through the windows and the lights were turned on as the instruction continued. But at some point in the evening, another odor began to waft in. Something was burning...

Before they knew it, the students of non-violence were surrounded by the epitome of violence. All around the building, members of the Klan stood, rifles and torches in their hands. As several burst through the door, they ordered the young people to the floor at gunpoint. Some in one room, others in another. And for what seemed like hours they lay there, hands over their heads, waiting for the shooting to begin.

But something happened that night. As the Klan stood with their guns trained on the young advocates of non-violence, someone began to sing “We Shall Overcome.” And soon the song traveled to the other room until all were singing. As Bernice Johnson Reagon tells the story, the Klan didn’t know quite what to do and time seemed to stand still as violence and non-violence met one another. As the verse ended, there was a pause until someone started a verse that had never been sung before. With the power of the Holy Spirit, a voice rang out “We are not afraid, we are not afraid, we are not afraid today. Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome someday.”

And then the sound of boots on the floor. And the sounds of doors closing. And the sounds of cars starting. And the Klan was gone.

[pause]

She had heard that this one called Jesus was in town. She knew he was staying in an out-of-the-way place. And, although she didn't know what they might do to her, she burst in and on bended knees, she spoke to him. With fear but not cowardice, she named her reality and her need. She named her desire and, in naming, her clear conviction that she deserved to receive what she asked for.

His first response was exactly according to the script he was supposed to follow. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” I have come to work for and on behalf of my people, Jesus says, not yours.

Just like the exchange is supposed to go. He superior, she deferential. He dismissive. Now she is supposed to go away in shame.

But just as the act of entering the house is wrought with fear but not cowardice, so she challenges, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

And then, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

[pause]

Our scripture reading this morning is a familiar one. One, that frankly, I have struggled with. Its echos in the eucharist prayer, "O, Lord I am not worthy to gather the crumbs from beneath thy table, but just say the word and I shall be healed." I'm sorry, maybe it's being raised UCC, but I have always hated it.

The sense of unworthiness. The apparent disregard Jesus has for the woman. I have never liked it.

But, lucky for me, I was raised in a home in which we grappled with Scripture like one does with an old friend who you know has a lot to teach you. And so I've been reading about this text and re-reading the text itself¹.

Let me tell you where my heart and mind have come to.

There is a lot going on around the story of the Syrophenician woman and Jesus. First of all, it is preceded by a stand-off between the religious authorities (the Pharisees) and Jesus over what is clean and what is unclean. In a characteristically Markan Jesus way, Jesus is blunt with his colleagues. "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites... You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." He goes on to teach and preach that it is not what goes into a person that defiles, but what comes out. "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come..."

So the first bit of context is Jesus' challenge to the status quo that directly precedes this story.

But, perhaps equally important, is the social location that Jesus and the Syrophenician woman hold. In first century Palestine, the lines were drawn very clearly. And each person knew their place. Honor and shame dictated much of human behavior. Men were the bearers and seekers after honor while women were the protectors and enforcers of shame. For a man to lose honor or a woman to act shameless was horrifying in this context. Moreover, one's honor as a Jewish man was deeply connected to how observant he was of purity laws and practices. That which was unclean or might defile was to be avoided at all costs.

It is into this honor-shame paradigm that the Syrophenician woman bursts. She is shameless, wanton, out of control-- putting herself at risk in all kinds of ways. And so, Jesus' response-- dismissive, derogatory, degrading-- was completely normal. He was keeping his honor as any Jewish man in his right mind would. It is a moment of humanness in Jesus' ministry perhaps unparalleled in the gospel.

But the woman won't allow him to get off with being an average man, bound by culture-- her need, her passion for her daughter, her sense of right and wrong are too strong. And so she challenges Jesus-- for a second time.

And it is as if his face has been slapped and he is reminded of his mission and ministry. Because the whole of the Markan gospel is a narrative of Jesus' symbolic journey "on the way." His journey from the beginning of the gospel to the end is from the margins to the very center of religious, economic and cultural power-- Jerusalem. In this text, he is still way out in the far reaches of Galilee. He is still honing his message. But his confrontation with the Pharisees gives us a foretaste of what is to come.

¹ The primary source for my exegesis here is Myers, Ched, *Binding the Strong Man*, [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988; pp. 196-200].

Jesus' mission and ministry-- which the Syrophenician woman calls him back to - is nothing less than bringing in the Kingdom of God. It is nothing less than transforming a cultural and religious system based on honor and shame in which some are in and some are out. It is nothing less than uprooting an economic system in which some are fat while others starve. It is nothing less than toppling this deeply dis-ordered reality in favor of a divine economy in which all are beloved children of God.

The Syrophenician woman's dare saves herself and Jesus by calling him back to what is really real. Her shame and his honor were not really real. Instead they are both beloved children of God. Marking some as foreigner, outcast, other-- is not really real. It is based in a human economy that Jesus has come to overturn in favor of God's economy.

But the story also gives us a clue about methods. In this story, the Syrophenician woman's actions are telling. Although filled with fear, she is not overcome by cowardice. She does no violence, rather finds a creative, non-violent way to make Jesus see the ways in which he is lessened by what the human economy dictates. She goes to his place, uses his language, but challenges him.

It is the same method that Jesus has been using in the preceding chapters. And it is the same method that Jesus will employ to the very end. Non-violent, direct action that claims the humanity and worth of all involved.

[pause]

They were queer, every one of them. Odd, outcast, weird, sick, sinful... queer. They were drag queens and bull dykes dressed in things that would make the typical 60's housewife shudder. They were black and white, Latino and Asian American and they were mostly working class.

They had been beaten up, scorned by their families as repulsive, committed to mental hospitals. Their lives were filled with fear, intimidation and shame.

But on this night in the summer of 1969, something happened...

At first it was according to the script. The police entered the bar; the mafia bosses took their things and left; and the queers were herded out the door.

But as they were being pushed toward the usual, normal humiliation, something shifted. Some energy changed. And someone stopped. Someone was overcome by the Spirit and said, no, not this time. And before they knew it, coins were being thrown-- a symbol of the system of extortion.

And soon the paddie wagon had been emptied and the police pushed back into the bar.

And like the spreading of new words to an old song, word went around Christopher Street and Greenwich Village and the crowds gathered. And over the course of the next 5 nights, they swelled and swelled.

In response, the tactical police force was called in and, with their billy clubs and riot gear, they pushed into the crowd.

But the crowd would not be quashed. Instead, when the tactical police force came at them, they ran ahead, turned the block and re-formed behind the police.

When the police whirled around to reverse direction at one point, they found themselves face-to-face with their worst nightmare: a chorus line of mocking queens, their arms clasped around each other, kicking their heels in the air Rockettes-style and singing at the tops of their sardonic voices:

*'We are the Stonewall girls
We wear our hair in curls
We wear our dungarees
Above our nelly knees!'*

It was a deliciously witty, creative counterpoint to the tactical police force's brute force.

My friends, we are called to be witty, creative and bold. We are invited to find non-violent ways that remind us-- and the world-- of what is really real. We are cajoled by the Spirit to participate in the divine economy. Strangers are family, all are welcomed, honor and shame are left aside in favor of the belovedness of all God's children.

It sounds so very simple, but the young people at the Highlander Center in the 1950's and the Syrophenian woman and the queers at Stonewall forty years ago last week, all knew that it takes tremendous courage. It takes the kind of faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit that are gifts from God. And it takes the willingness to hearken, not to human tradition but to the commandments of God.

So, as we gather—as an Open and Affirming congregation, as a congregation that serves at Loaves and Fishes, as a faithful congregation in this crazy, wonderful denomination known as the United Church of Christ, may our forebears in faith-- singers of We Shall Overcome, Challengers of Even Jesus when human tradition overtakes God's love, outrageous street dancers-- may our forebears and our faith in God, embolden us to follow in the path they have laid for us.

Amen and amen.