

Sunday, September 6, 2015
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Mark 7:24-37

Out of the Way

Jesus does a really strange thing in the gospel today. Did you hear something strange in the reading we just heard? Maybe you, too, were surprised by it, bothered by it, by what Jesus does. After spending some time in the cities of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus heads towards the Sea of Galilee by way of the region of the Decapolis. Can you believe that?! (Some geographical translation may be in order. That route that Jesus takes is like this: Here's Chicago. It's like, after spending some time in Milwaukee and Madison, heading to Chicago by way of the state of Michigan.) You would think the Son of God had a better sense of direction than that. Jesus goes completely out of the way.

Is there anyone else who is bothered by that, by going out of the way? Some years ago, my family and I took a summer trip in which we drove to Washington state from Chicago. We left early in the morning from my brother's house—he lives a bit west of here, in Mount Prospect. But we didn't realize that at the interstate entrance by my brother's house, you could only get on 90 going east. So there we were, groggy eyed, starting our two thousand mile trip to the Pacific northwest by heading straight towards downtown Chicago, the skyline rising above us with the sun. That's a particularly large example, but in general, and even in particularly small instances, I'm bothered by going out of the way. I can be rigorously attentive, get ridiculously fixated on charting out my errands in geographical order. Just ask my husband...

The geographical strangeness of Jesus route' in this gospel reading has bothered readers with hang-ups like mine for centuries, and various explanations are offered: Maybe Jesus had some other things to do, things that didn't get written down. Maybe whoever wrote this gospel story down, call this person "Mark," maybe that person had a bad sense of direction. Maybe it was Mark who didn't realize how strange it was to tell this story of the Son of God going so far out of the way. Or, maybe, being God incarnate does not include a perfect sense of direction. There's no doubt, though, it is really strange for Jesus to be going from Tyre & Sidon by way of the Decapolis, to Chicago. It's strange that he's there; that he's here, at all. It's strange that we are here at all.

What are we doing here, gathering to worship a Jewish man who lived two thousand years ago in a place whose geography is less than familiar to us? And, oh, by the way, he called a woman and her child dogs. That's the really strange thing in the gospel reading today, right? That's probably the strange thing that you noticed, and wondered about. I wonder about it. I wonder at this strange gospel reading, in which Jesus calls a woman a dog...

As with the geography, it's important to know the context, the incredible, cultural, historical, and economic divisions between Tyre and Sidon and Galilee, between the Gentile people, and the people of Israel. And it's important, too, to take into account the ancient attitude towards animals. This text was not transmitted to us by people who kept pets. The word dog was used as a derogatory term, a common slur for people from a different place, of a different ethnicity, of a different race. Maybe that woman's skin was a different color than Jesus's.

We don't know the color of her skin. We don't know the color of Jesus' skin. We do know that she comes to him with an urgent need, comes because her child's life is at risk. Stranger though she is to Jesus, she knows he can help her. She approaches him, overcome with emotion, falls on her knees. And Jesus say she shouldn't ask for the good things that are for other children, for children of another race. Jesus says it would be like tossing those things to dogs.

Here is where this reading really gets strange. The woman will not be deterred. She challenges Jesus, and Jesus acknowledges it, accepts it, approves it, commends it: “Yes,” Jesus says, “Because of what you said,” literally, because of that word, that logic, that argument, “Go, your child is made well.” This strange story is the only time that anyone wins an argument with Jesus in all of the gospels. This woman is the most certainly the most astute theologian in all of the gospel of Mark, a gospel in which Jesus’ own disciples never really understand who Jesus is or what he’s up to.

She does. Here is the logic of her argument: she takes what Jesus says, this comment about crumbs, and she makes another suggestion. What she says to Jesus, in effect, is this: “That’s too small. That’s not all you can do, that’s not all you can give. There’s more than enough for everyone.” She takes what Jesus says, and expands it, makes it about something bigger—just like Jesus did, just verses before, in the gospel reading we heard just last week. Just before the story we heard today is the story about handwashing, about not just paying lip service to a rule, but looking into one’s heart. In that story, Jesus takes a question about what is appropriate, and shows how it was about something bigger. In today’s story, it’s the woman who does that—to Jesus. Whoever wrote the gospel of Mark may have a lousy sense of geography, but they knew how to place a story, intentionally locating these episodes, one after another. After an the argument with the scribes about cleanliness, Jesus heads directly into Gentile, into unclean territory. There the largeness of the gospel Jesus proclaims is put to the test.

Just how big is this gospel? Is it bigger than the cultural worldview into which he was born? Is it bigger than centuries of deep seated animosity? Is the gospel bigger than the distance, the distrust between people of different races and ethnicities? Is the gospel bigger than a divide that did not begin the day one was born, but was a system that was inherited, is still inherited, something of which everyone is a part, by virtue of being human, by having skin? Is the gospel bigger than that?

“Yes,” Jesus says to the woman, and to us, “The gospel is bigger than that.” Way bigger than that. The gospel goes out of the way. God goes out of the way, for us. When were off the map, lost in sin, God came and found us. When were in bondage to systems that we did not create, when we pulled at the knots of that bondage, and made them even tighter, God loosed the power of love and forgiveness to make us one people, God’s beloved children, no matter the color of our skin. God goes out of the way, for us, in Jesus. God puts on human skin, becomes a person, who goes out of the way for us—all the way to the cross.

Jesus goes out of the way. Jesus goes out of the way to even be in the cities of Tyre and Sidon. No reason a Jewish man should go there, but that the gospel he proclaims moves him there, and there he is moved by the determination of a Gentile woman. And after that, Jesus goes yet more out of the way, traveling to the Decapolis, where he meets a deaf man with a speech impediment. Jesus goes to places where there are people who have not heard, or cannot hear, the gospel. Jesus goes out of the way for them. Jesus goes to a place that is filled with people who cannot speak, whose tongues have been silenced by suffering, oppression, injustice. Jesus goes out of the way to go there, and here, to opens ears, and to release tongues, because God’s love is bigger than all the ways we diminish one another.

You, and I can go out of the way. You went out of the way to be here today. It’s a holiday weekend. It’s hot. This church is not on a main road. You went out of your way to be here. We know what is, we know why we must, go out of the way. When the school calls, and your child is sick, you drop everything to go and help them return to health. When a nation is torn apart by racial violence, when mothers cry out that their children’s lives matter, black lives matter, we must go out of our way. We must go out of our way for healing. We go out of the way, because that is the way we follow the way, and know the way: Jesus, the way, and the truth and the life.