

A WIDENING IMPERATIVE

James 2:1-13; Mark 7:24-30
A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
First Presbyterian Church
New York, New York

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 9, 2018

The lectionary's juxtaposition of the two texts we just read betrays what Stephen Fowls calls "a wicked sense of humor on someone's part." The James passage begins with an assertion of the fundamental incompatibility of faith in Christ with partiality in human relationships and goes on to list ways in which believers typically display such favoritism. In Mark, Jesus seems to engage in the very sort of partiality that James warns against, refusing to heal a very sick child because she and her mother are outsiders.¹ What are we to make of this paradox?

Let's start with Mark. Our modern sensibilities bristle at this story, don't they? It describes an awkward moment, made memorable by what seems to be Jesus' rude rebuff of the woman's request for help. Here, as one scholar notes, at least for an instant Jesus seems to get caught with his compassion down.² A Gentile woman comes to him pleading for healing for her daughter. Jesus puts her off with a painful proverb about Jews, whom he likens to children at the table, and Gentiles, whom he dismisses as dogs. It is not right to feed the dogs with the food intended for children, he says. But she will not relent; if I am a dog then, at least treat me as a dog by giving me the crumbs from your table. She is not angry; she's heard it before, but she is as persistent as she is wise. And because of her unusual but gripping claim on Jesus' compassion, her plea is heard, and her prayer is answered.³

Many commentators have proffered theories to explain Jesus' uncharacteristic and abrupt response to the woman. In the end, though, it's all conjecture; no one knows why he responded as he did. Most scholars agree, however, that in focusing on Jesus' initial response we may miss the point of his ultimate response. This Gentile woman chides Jesus into changing his mind, into seeing that his mission extends beyond the house of Israel. In response, Jesus begins to widen his circle of compassion and concern and hospitality, and from this point on, there is no stopping the widening imperative. It is important, therefore, to note that this woman is not a contestant with Jesus, not his antagonist; she is in league with the very interior of his mission, connected to its movement; she simply presses him to claim the fullness of that mission. There is much to learn from this woman whose faith is a lively, vigorous, and insisting power that does not give up easily.⁴

¹ Stephen Fowl, "God's Choice," *Christian Century*, September 5, 2006, 20.

² Sharon Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story," in Letty Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Westminster Press, 1985, 69.

³ Fred Craddock, in Craddock, Hayes, Holladay and Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: B*, Trinity Press International, 1993, 405.

⁴ Craddock, 405.

We sometimes equate faith, I think, with passive acceptance of a doctrine, or a quiet acquiescence or calm that consoles us in a time of sadness and loss. Less often do we think about faith as aggressive, insisting power . . . or as a force that has the capacity to influence the mind of God. Yet this woman's faith was both those things. She had a deep-seated confidence that Jesus could do what she was asking, indeed that it was his *nature* to save and to heal and to cast out demons, and that he *had* to grant her request, even if she *was* a Gentile and a woman and speaking out of place. This is a story about tenacity of faith.

There is an even more important point to this story, however, for fundamentally this is a story about God's grace and the widening circles of those who receive it. Jesus' initial response to the woman was wrapped up in his own understanding of his mission as first and foremost to his own people, the Jews. Jesus didn't apologize for that fact.⁵ He was a Jew, sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But in this woman's insistent reminder of the breadth and nature of his purpose, Jesus began to see the true expanse of his mission.

Her persistence and Jesus' ultimate embrace of her request serve as a reminder to the church. One of the recurring questions the church is asked to address is the question about its mission: whom do we serve? Christine Chakoian says all it boils down largely to one beginning point: we gather to take care of ourselves and to take care of our own, because we know that within the community of faith the needs we bear and the burdens that our loved ones carry are likely to be met with compassion and grace . . . because we believe that here we will encounter Christ. We need not apologize for focusing on the needs of this congregation and of those who come to be a part of who we are. That is why we are here. But at the same time the persistent voices of others beyond these walls compel us to embrace a mission beyond the near, the comfortable, or the obvious.⁶

Jesus' widening mission to the Gentiles did not negate his mission to His own, any more than our commitment and mission to the world negate or diminish the ministries that happen within these walls. We start here, but like the ripples that move ever outward from the stone that is tossed into the waters, the ripples of faith and service always move us outward from the center. What we learn along the way is that it is not a matter of competition: it is not a matter of ministries to our own versus ministries to the world out there. Indeed, our ministries to our own are precisely to equip us to take our faith to the world . . . through ministries of healing and wholeness, of mercy and justice, of love and compassion and peace. The model for such movement is none other than Jesus himself, and the love at its core is none other than the love of God.

The story of the Gentile woman and her tenacious pursuit of grace is thus also a story about a God who wants to share such grace with all the children of Earth, and of a Christ who, despite his seeming reluctance, opened the door for such grace to be extended to the Gentiles. It is the story of Jesus, who was moved by the earnest petitions of a young mother in need. It is the story of a God who, despite our own unworthiness, still meets us across a Table, at which boundless grace is shared, so that it may be taken into an often-

⁵ Christine Chakoian, in a sermon on this text preached September 7, 1997 at the Community Presbyterian Church of Clarendon Hills, Illinois.

⁶ Chakoian.

graceless world. That is our calling, our mission. It is what we are about.

That is also what our passage from the Letter to James affirms, albeit with a more precise focus. It, too, is about a widening imperative in mission, but James is not concerned with expanding the mission in general. He takes specific aim at how the church treats the poor. He decries the church's age-old partiality to those of means and its disregard for those who have little. It is a hard word to hear, for James calls us to examine the narrowness of our graciousness in light of Christ's ever-widening call and claim on us and to think beyond present practice to the way Christ calls us to live.

Parker Palmer calls the chasm between what is and what should be, between the way we are and the way we are meant to be, "the tragic gap." There are many gaps in our day, but none more tragic than the chasm between those who have and those who have not, between those who know the privileges of the "inside," and those who live on the "outside." It is everywhere to be seen, from the stark dichotomy of the faces we see around this Village to the racially-charged debate on immigration in this nation. Palmer says the church's calling is to stand in the gap... the gap between what is and what God intends.

Presbyterian pastor Trace Haythorn spoke once of the widening grace we are called to embody, sharing as he did a story of one who stood in the gap and embraced the expanding imperative of God's claim. It is the story of Sandor Teszler.

Teszler left Hungary for the United States after escaping from a concentration camp with his family in the early part of World War II. Trained as a textile worker, he made his way to Spartanburg, SC... long a center of the textile industry [and later took ownership of a textile factory]. In the 1950s, after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Mr. Teszler became anxious as he saw the rise and the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan and as he heard the racist rhetoric [and fear-mongering] around him begin to intensify. He recognized it from his days in Europe, and he could not simply ignore it for the sake of business. He went to his foreman and asked where the racial tensions were most hostile in [that] area. The foreman replied that he wasn't sure where the worst was, but it couldn't get much worse than around King's Mountain. Mr. Teszler announced that day that he would be building a new factory in King's Mountain.

When word got out, the white mayor of King's Mountain came to see Mr. Teszler, asking if he planned to hire white workers. Mr. Teszler told him to recruit the best workers he could find, and if they were good enough, he would hire them. Shortly thereafter, the black pastor of a large African-American church came to Mr. Teszler and expressed his hope that Mr. Teszler would be hiring black workers. Again, Mr. Teszler encouraged him to find the best workers he could, and if they were good enough, he would hire them.

In the end, Sandor Teszler hired 16 new employees: eight white and eight black. In the mill, there was one bathroom, one set of showers, one water fountain. After initial introductions and a tour of the plant were complete, one white worker

... asked, “Is this gonna be some kind of integrated plant?” Mr. Teszler replied, “You are being paid twice as much as any other textile worker in the area. You can work with us here in the way we work, or you can go somewhere else. Any other questions?” There were none, and all 16 employees stayed.

Several months later, the plant had grown in production such that a new group of employees was hired. And after their tour, the same question was raised by a white worker: “Is this some kind of integrated plant?” And this time, the white foreman replied, “You are being paid twice as much as any other textile worker in the area. You can work with us here in the way we work, or you can go somewhere else. Any other questions?”⁷

Says Trace Haythorne, “Because Sandor Teszler dared to stand in the tragic gap, an entire industry was integrated. James calls us not to choose between rich and poor, not to choose between black and white, not to choose between young and old, [developed world and developing world], free and imprisoned, [gay and straight], sick and healthy, naked and clothed, hungry and fed. In the end, these are all false dichotomies, for we are *all* children of God. James calls us to stand with the cross of Jesus Christ – to take up residence in the ... gap between what is and what should be.”⁸

Like Jesus, in the presence of that persistent Gentile woman, we may be uncomfortable at such a suggestion. We may hesitate at first. But if we listen, we may come to see that standing with him means discovering what he discovered – that our mission is wider than we had figured and, if we trust it, is capable of building a bridge across all kinds of gaps.

⁷ Trace Haythorn, “The Tragic Gap,” sermon broadcast on *Day 1*, September, 6, 2009. Haythorne’s sermon cites a presentation by Ben Dunlap, president of Wofford College, as the source of the story.

⁸ Haythorne.