

“Compassion and Controversy”

Mark 7:24-37

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This morning our attention is drawn to two of Jesus’ healing miracles. Both of these stories contain compassion and controversy, traits not commonly connected.

Once again, Jesus was kind to the wrong people, which gives us much to ponder as we wrestle with the mysteries of life and faith. Let me share the details with you.

Up to this point in Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ public ministry focused upon the people around the Sea of Galilee. For the most part, Jesus was welcomed and well received.

At the same time, he had his share of critics and naysayers. Some of the religious authorities made it clear they did not like him or what he was doing. They strongly disagreed with his portrayal of God and his interpretation of ancient scriptures.

In addition, they were deeply disturbed about the way Jesus healed people. He ignored tradition and disobeyed many sacred rules and regulations.

It is obvious Jesus had grown weary in well doing and needed a break. To get some rest, Jesus and the disciples traveled north to two towns on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, Tyre and Sidon. Since this area of the Syrian Province was heavily populated by Gentiles, it played a major role in the drama to follow.

Upon entering Tyre, Jesus went to a house and instructed everyone there to tell no one where he was. Because Jesus was a celebrity by this time, his wish to remain anonymous would quickly fade away.

A woman who heard where he was came to him and fell at his feet. Immediately, she begged Jesus to heal her daughter who was possessed by an evil spirit.

This is where the story takes a sharp turn. The dialogue between Jesus and this woman is fascinating.

“First, let the children (Jews) eat all they want,” Jesus told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs (Gentiles).” (Mark 7:27)

“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” (Mark 7:28)

Then Jesus told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” (Mark 7:29)

According to Mark, when the woman returned to her home, her daughter had been healed. Mark also tells his readers Jesus left Tyre and traveled to another region thickly populated with Gentiles, a ten city area known as the Decapolis just below the Sea of Galilee.

While there, people brought a deaf man to Jesus and begged him to heal him. Jesus did, which amazed everyone who witnessed it.

“He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak,” they said. (Mark 7:37)

Why did Mark place these two miracles together? What makes them unique from the nine miracles he wrote about prior to these?

I pondered these two questions for some time last week. Let me share some ideas with you.

To me, the most striking feature of these two miracles is where they occurred, in areas heavily populated by Gentiles. Quite frankly, I believe Jesus went north to Tyre to rest. He was exhausted. Compassion fatigue had set in, and he needed to get away from the towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee.

I think he chose to go to Tyre because he thought he would not be bothered there. The Gentiles would not come looking for him like his own people had. And then, this woman with a sick child showed up.

It is obvious she made life very uncomfortable for Jesus. If he healed her daughter, word would spread quickly, and he would get no rest.

In addition, if Jesus responded compassionately to this desperate mother's plea for help, he would be severely criticized for coming to the aid of a Gentile, in particular, a Gentile woman. If he thought healing someone on the Sabbath or eating food with unclean hands brought the wrath of the Pharisees upon him, he had seen nothing yet. Befriending a Gentile would make him public enemy #1, and it did.

So, what did Jesus do? It appears to me he did two things. He granted this mother's request and healed her daughter because of her persistence and quick thinking.

How could he not do this? She was right. Jesus may have been sent first to the Jews, described as the 'children' in this text, but this did not mean his mission focused exclusively upon helping them. Gentiles were God's children, too, and their needs were as crucial and urgent as the Jews. It was time for Jesus to listen to their pleas for help and reach out to them, which he did that day.

Secondly, when Jesus left the Mediterranean coast, he headed to the area around the Sea of Galilee that had more Gentiles than any other. It was time to make an adjustment in his ministry and send a bold message that his vision of the kingdom of God included Gentiles.

Remember, up to this point in Mark, Jesus' attention had been devoted solely to the needs of the Hebrew children. This had to change, and Jesus wasted no time making this change.

Upon leaving Tyre and passing through Sidon, Jesus traveled to the Decapolis to send a message to all who were following his ministry that no person or group of people should be considered unworthy of his healing touch. Every human was a child of God in need of hope and help, and he would be God's agent of compassion and grace.

Was Jesus aware that this inclusive philosophy of ministry symbolized by what he did in Tyre for this Gentile woman and the Gentiles in the Decapolis would incense the religious authorities and endanger his life? Sure he was.

He grew up hearing the scribes and Pharisees tell people they must have no contact with Gentiles, and if they did, they must go through meticulous cleansing rituals. Gentiles were an inferior people who deserved no attention, compassion or grace.

So yes, Jesus knew his good deeds would not just be a break from tradition but an act of heresy. Yet, he did them anyway. Why?

God sent him to break down barriers by building bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation instead of erecting walls of suspicion and hate. His goal was not to be popular but to be faithful, and he was loyal to God all the way to the cross.

How does this text speak to us today? What does Mark hope we take away from it? Perhaps it is this.

Our mission, like Jesus', is to build bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation to all people instead of erecting walls of suspicion and hate. To do any less is to be unfaithful to God's call upon our lives.

"Where is God?" Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber was asked. "God is between people. He is found in relationships. God fills the space between us so that we are connected, not separated from others."

Filling the space between people and bringing them together is no small challenge. We live in an age when people want to trade love, not give it away.

Most people are eager to share love with those who love them or those who are like them. They balk, however, at loving those who are different or difficult. Yet, the gospel demands we do both. This, according to Jesus and Mark, is not negotiable.

How do we do this, especially in our polarized society where people live behind economic, political, theological, racial and ethnic fortresses? I suppose we do what Jesus did.

We see people through God's eyes.

We treat them respectfully as we want to be treated.

We ask for their names, look at pictures of their families and listen to their stories.

We seek to understand their perspective on life based upon their experiences and what those events and encounters have taught them.

We encourage them to share their hopes and dreams and to listen to their anxieties, worries, fears and frustrations.

We listen to their pleas for help that others ignore or try to silence.

We respond to them as if they were a member of our own family.

We use our influence and power to plead their case before those whose decisions can make life better for them.

We share what we have with them when they are struggling.

We pray for them and ask God to use us as agents of peace and goodwill as God did Jesus.

We pick them up when they fall and hold them up when they are weak.

Last Friday, we commemorated the fourteenth anniversary of 9-11. The images of those towers falling in Manhattan are forever burned into the hearts and minds of all who witnessed it firsthand or watched it on television.

One of the most moving stories I read about that fateful day focused upon two men who were running away from the falling towers. They were strangers but their paths crossed after one of the men stumbled and fell.

When the injured man looked behind him, he saw debris and smoke coming his way. He was in shock and unable to move, though.

This is the time the other man who was also running for his life came down the walkway where the fallen man was lying. He abruptly stopped, knelt down beside him and offered assistance. With a helping hand and encouraging words, he lifted the fallen man to his feet and led him to safety.

What was so unusual about this particular incident? Surely, they were not the only two people who assisted each other that day.

One man was a Pakistani Muslim, and the other was a Hasidic Jew. That day, these two men who had little in common except for contempt for one another became brothers.

This is the kind of world I want to live in.

Jesus did, too.

What about you?