

Pentecost 14B
Mark 7:24-37

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When I was growing up, we had toy poodle named Pandy. Pandy was a very funny, little dog who new how to whisper and would hide in shame after going to the groomer. She guarded her dog treats ferociously and would carry her food one kibble at a time from her dish in the kitchen to the dining room carpet to eat it. Pandy is best remembered for her serenades at the dinner table. My mom had a very strict view of feeding dogs from the table. It was not done. Ever. Pandy never seemed to cotton much to this rule. Night after night after night she would sit next to someone's chair at the dinner table and groan. Kind of like this. In spite of my mom's strict rule about never, ever feeding the dog from the table...Pandy remained optimistic.

And she had good reason. When my Grandma was at our house for a meal, which was rare, Pandy knew instinctively where to take up her dinner time post. She would start groaning as the dishes were passed. Then Grandma would take a quick glance at my mom to see if she was watching, fill her fork with whatever was on her plate and "plop," down it would go on to the carpet. Gravy, sauce, cranberries, didn't matter. Grandma had a very different idea about feeding dogs at the table. Grandma sent manna from heaven. And so Pandy was rewarded and lived out her long years in eternal hope. As did Grandma.

The message of the gospel today is one of great hope. These are stories of the power of Christ to change lives in great and impossible ways. Outsiders become insiders, the captive are set free, the deaf hear and the mute speak. It is enough to keep us coming back to the table again and again in hope. After all, what mother or father has not worried over a sick child and imagined to what lengths he or she might go to ease their suffering? Which of us has not needed healing of mind, body or spirit? Which of us has not longed for a touch of love?

But there is more than hope in this pair of stories from the Gospel. They are arresting stories; stories that remind us who Jesus is and what it means to follow him. It helps to consider that this story really begins about a chapter earlier when Jesus feeds the 5000 on a hillside in Jewish territory. There he blesses the hungry with an abundance of bread. They had done nothing to deserve it, they didn't even ask for it but Jesus fed them. And there were crumbs enough left to fill twelve baskets. As the story goes on, Jesus is teaching about clean and unclean foods. For generations the Jews had washed and categorized food in obedience to the law and now Jesus says that everything has changed. Food is no longer defined as clean or unclean. As Jesus says, it is not what goes into you from the outside that defiles you. "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these things come from within, and they defile a person." Jesus has moved the line that separates the clean from the unclean.

Then Jesus gets up, leaves Jewish territory crosses the line into the heart of defilement. He enters a Gentile territory where Jews had been sorely treated. He will find no welcome there. But throughout these chapters of Mark, Jesus has been struggling to find a place to rest and be apart from the crowd. Maybe he thought to find it here. After all, who would follow him? But alas, his reputation has grown too large to contain and even here they find him. And the crossing of lines continues when he is approached by a Gentile woman who has the audacity to kneel at his feet and speak.

Jesus initial response to her makes us very uncomfortable. Did you note it? How can our Jesus-lamb, shepherd, balm, and friend-speak so inhospitably to a humble woman seeking help for her suffering child? What on earth is going on with him? How can he talk this way?

Well, a couple of things. First, Jesus response is jarring to us because we hear the story through 2000 years of post resurrection history. We know the extent to which Jesus will ultimately go for us Gentiles. Plus, we have three other Gospels, more than a dozen letters, countless stories, and thousands of hymns that shape our understanding of who Jesus is and how we expect him to act. Our pictures of Jesus include the gentle Shepherd in white, knocking on our door. And they include a mighty warrior defeating the powers and principalities of evil that threaten us. But our images of Jesus don't include him acting like, well, a snob or even kind of a jerk. It's one thing for my mom to say that animals are not to be fed from the table. It is quite another thing for our gentle Jesus to look down his nose at a worried mother and call her a dog!

Isn't it interesting that we expect something from Jesus? When she asks her question, we have already formulated in our minds what his response is supposed to be. Something along the lines of "What can I do for you today?" or "Your faith has made her well." But is that expectation a reasonable one? After all, what claim does she have on him? What claim do any of us have on Jesus? This is the Son of God, King of Israel? Who can lay a claim on him?

To the early listener, Jesus' response would not have sounded like a jerk. The line dividing the Jews and Gentiles was a clear and carefully-observed one. Gentiles were unclean. So Jesus' first response should not have been unexpected. What happens next is what is unexpected. She uses his own words to counter his claim that she is an unworthy dog. She dares to challenge him and Jesus grants her request. This is would have been truly unexpected. And yet, this time Jesus himself had set the stage when he taught that it is not what is on the outside that defiles us. It is what comes from within. And what came from within that woman was a statement of certainty that even she, a filthy Gentile dog, belongs at the table. Even if it is underneath it. And the final unexpected thing is that Jesus doesn't just throw her a crumb. Jesus gives her fully what she had asked for: her daughter is made well. The demon is gone.

As much as I really hate to hear Jesus say those initial harsh words of dismissal, I rather like this story. Jesus arrests our attention by doing the very thing he had just cautioned the disciples against. In his first response to her, he draws a line between insider and outsider. We are familiar with this line. Nearly all of us have at one time or another experienced life on the wrong side of the dividing line. Maybe it is your gender, your income, your appearance, your weight, your color, the way you speak, your level of education, who you love, how you vote, how you dress, where you live, whom you live with or what you do for a living. Few of us have escaped exclusion.

But as my friend Pastor Laurie Eaton is fond of saying: “wherever we draw the line, Jesus stands with those on the outside.” Gender, nationality, economic class, denomination...all these are boundaries that mean nothing to God other than as signs of our repeated perpetration of injustice against one another.

This story shows us just how ugly and uncomfortable and unjust exclusion can be. It also shows us the intelligence, faithfulness and determination of those we place on the outside. It shows us the breadth of God’s grace and love. But Jesus shows us even more. We often think of Jesus as our friend. But we must remember that Jesus is the King of Israel, son of God. Just like this woman, we have done nothing to merit the right to make a claim on Jesus. We have not deserved the right to expect anything. Instead, in faith Jesus makes the claim on us. It is Jesus who acts. Nothing is held back. No crumbs are given, only full loaves of life and forgiveness and grace.

Jesus reminds us that it is not up to us who comes to the table to eat. It is not our call. It is not even our table. This is the table of the King. He extends the invitation. He decides who eats. It is not our job to protect Jesus or to draw a line across the door of God’s church. We are here only by the grace granted us by God. And we are reminded by Jesus to extend that grace to all.

Amen.