

Proper 18B  
Mark 7: 24-37  
6 September 2009  
Christ Church Norcross

**Often in our staff meetings, we read the Gospel Lesson for the coming Sunday and reflect upon it together. That is what we did this past Tuesday – and once again, I discovered the importance of reading Scripture in a gathering of community. Before the invention of the printing press, Scripture was always read aloud – and it was discussed within the context of a community.**

**As we read the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman in our staff meeting, two very different theologies emerged in the discussion. In the story, a Gentile woman approaches Jesus asking him to heal her daughter who has a demon.**

**Jesus is not standing out in the street. He seems to want some privacy at that moment. He goes into a house, and the**

**woman has the nerve to follow him right in. Emboldened by the love she has for her child, the woman shows great courage in doing this. She's not even a Jew, but a Gentile: an "untouchable" to the Jews of that day.**

**According to Mark's Gospel, the woman gets right to the point: she asks Jesus to heal her daughter.**

**Jesus makes a retort that leaves us, as current-day Christians, utterly astonished. It is not like Jesus to reject the outsider. In the Gospels, we read over and over of incidents when Jesus disregards cultural and societal norms in favor of getting close to folks who need him.**

**I pointed this out to my staff, and asked them why they thought Jesus acts in this way. (I have their permission to quote them this morning.) Gretchen spoke up with her usual enthusiasm. In fact, she told the group that this is one of her favorite stories in the Gospel.**

**Gretchen's thought is that Jesus actually changes his mind in the story. When the Syrophenician woman**

**challenges him – she does have a great comeback – Jesus responds and makes an adjustment in his own attitude.**

**Gretchen likes the fact that Jesus allows himself to learn from this ordinary human being – in fact, from someone whom most Jews would consider an outcast.**

**In Gretchen’s interpretation of the story, we understand Jesus’ *human* nature; which for many of us makes him more approachable, even more lovable. The fact that Jesus makes a *faux pas* does not mean that he loses his spiritual perfection. Being *perfect* in the spiritual sense is not the same as being perfectionistic. Being perfect is being whole – being complete. And Jesus embraces that process.**

**Maria Elena had a different interpretation of Jesus’ behavior toward the Syrophenician woman. She explained that Jesus, the Son of God who knows all things, wanted to test this woman’s faith – wanted her to learn the virtue of humility that is necessary in order for God’s healing to work within her.**

**Maria Elena discussed the beauty of Jesus' healing capacity and his deeper wisdom, which we don't see upon first glance at the story. For Maria Elena, there is never a time in Jesus' life and ministry that he is not fully functioning as God.**

**So, between two Christ Church staff members, an age-old argument emerges. Does Jesus actually learn from an ordinary human being, decide that he was wrong, and then change his mind? Or, does he reject her at first, only to teach her an important lesson? We enjoyed a lively debate – and we grew closer to one another disagreeing respectfully, and taking the risk to share our deep feelings and opinions.**

**I wonder: How often does that happen when folks get together to discuss the Bible?**

**I shared this conversation with my husband David later that evening. He presented yet a third perspective. For David, Jesus is teaching a lesson: not to the Syrophenician woman, but to the Temple leaders ... to the first century Jewish-**

**Christian readers ... and to us. In his initial rejection of the woman, he shows the leaders what their own sin looks like.**

**However Jesus acts at the beginning of the narrative, his presence – as always -- brings about healing: not only to the daughter with a demon, but to the deaf man who cannot speak. The power of God transforms. Jesus, who is fully a human being and fully the Son of God, attracts, touches, and heals all those who draw near to him.**

**I find in the actions of the Syrophenician woman a model for relating to God in our most urgent need. This woman of low status doesn't take no for an answer from Jesus. She persists until her request is heard. When we relate this to our own prayer practice, how persistent are we in our prayers to God? Do we hedge our bets? Do we secretly make excuses for God or worse yet, avoid asking for what we want so we won't have to face disappointment if we don't get it?**

**Years ago, when all of the couples in our neighborhood were having their second child, David and I became**

**disheartened that John would be our only child. Not that we didn't love John fiercely; we simply new the value of having siblings, if for no other reason than to learn the necessary lessons of humility. The biological clock continued to race and it began to appear that we would have an only child.**

**It had not occurred to us to ask directly for another child. We said prayers like, "God, if it be your will, please send us another child. If you decide not to, help us to accept your will." But finally, one evening while saying my night prayers, I lost my temper. I slammed my fist on the carpet and yelled, "God, I want another child; I want John to have a brother or sister! This is really important to me and I don't see why it can't be so."**

**Well, about two weeks later I started feeling lousy every morning. A friend suggested that I take a pregnancy test. And, sure enough, we were expecting. Craig was born, and John had his brother. All these years I have lived in deep gratitude that God heard my impassioned prayer.**

**Now, I know what some of you are thinking: “Why didn’t God answer *my* prayer to have a child? Why didn’t God provide a cure for my child’s sickness? Why doesn’t God send me another job?” And many, many other things you may have prayed about.**

**I wish I had the answer to that. I don’t. But, I do know this: God wants our honesty. God wants our persistence. God wants us to want what is good, what is right, and what will ultimately bring us to home to him.**

**God wants us to be in prayer with Him – to talk to him with all our hearts – to not hold back or make excuses. There is risk in this. There is the chance that sometimes we won’t get what we want. But, that should never stop us from asking, from relating to the One and only One who can help us heal and become who we really are.**

**There is great mystery in this. Following God in Christ is not about asking God to do his magic so that our lives are easier and more pleasurable. Following God in Christ is about**

**asking for what we need and trusting that what God allows will be good for us, even when it hurts.**

**So, let us carry into this week before us, the persistence and the courage of the Syrophenician woman – let us pray with our whole heart for that which brings us closest to the Beloved.**