“One Person Too Many”

Mark 7:24-37 First

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From the Pulpit
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I read an article in the Columbus Dispatch on August 19 titled “Roadwork rage leaves man, cop bloodied.” It is the account of a man who, fed up with all the noise through the night, the dust, the vibrations . . . all the inconveniences of road work . . . lost his cool and accosted the construction workers. “I’ve been putting up with this bleep on the freeway all summer! I’ve had all I can bleeping take. It’s been all summer, the slammin’ and the hammerin’ and the hummin’ and the beatin’ of the drum. Something’s gotta give.” You and I may not have rushed the IDot workers, but we can sympathize with this feeling that it is just too much!

You have just finished grading papers; you are ready to quit for the night and go to bed; and a very late paper from a really annoying student pops into your in box. One paper too many!

You’re running late for starters. You can’t find your car keys. Just as you head out the door, the phone rings. You finally get into the car, back out of the garage, turn into the street . . . . and you’re behind a school bus that will stop every two blocks.
Your day has been full of irritations . . . just one thing after another . . . most of it totally out of your control. You finally get home, ready to put some supper together . . . and you find the kitchen sink drain stopped up.

We know how it feels to be ready to blow. You just can’t deal with one more issue, one more phone call, one more person . . . even if it is someone you dearly love.

Jesus has reached that point. Gospel writer Mark tells us he’s gone off across the border for some retreat time. Jesus has been in a whirlwind of activity . . . days of relentless encounters with people and their various concerns. Our passage for today is toward the end of chapter 7, but if we look back in chapter six, we see this never-ending pressure cooker Jesus has been living in. It began in his hometown. He taught in his home synagogue, and people were astounded. Ultimately, they were offended and the best he could do was leave to find greener pastures. He went about the villages around Nazareth, teaching people, getting his disciples prepared for their work. After John the Baptist was beheaded, he decided to get away for a while and went off to what Mark calls “a deserted place.” But the people in these villages loved Jesus, and they hunted him down. Crowds came . . . he ended having to feed one crowd of 5,000. In another attempt to get some time for himself he went up the mountain, sending his disciples across the lake
in a boat. Eventually he returned and Mark records the story in which he walks on the water, intending to by-pass his disciples. They, of course, recognize him and are panic stricken by what they see and he has to join them in the boat and get them calmed down. Then as soon as they get to the shore, people see him and the crowds gather again. Now if all that activity wasn’t enough pressure, the Pharisees and Scribes begin to harass him.

By this time, Jesus has had about all he can take. Constantly on the move; unrelenting requests for his time and energy; the pressure of crowds gathering; disciples that don’t always get what he is trying to do; his inability to really get away from it all; finally, in desperation, he crosses the border and goes into foreign territory for some retreat time. He ends up in a house in Tyre, one of the cities in Phoenicia, the southern part of the Roman District of Syria . . . . hence Syrophoenician.

Mark tells us Jesus had made it clear he wanted some privacy, some uninterrupted time. He needed time to re-generate, to get his life in order. As one commentator said, “he is preached out, prayed out, peopled out. He is holed up in a safe house and he doesn’t want anybody to know he’s there.

And then there is a knock on the door. Word had somehow gotten out, you see. There is no escape. The door
opens and there stands a Syrophoenician woman . . . a
local woman . . . with a big problem. She has a demon-
possessed daughter for whom she wants healing.

This woman is taking some big risks in coming to
Jesus. He is a Jew; she is a Gentile. And their cultures have
had some really bad blood between them. He is a man; she
is a woman; He’s a rabbi; she’s a mother with a diseased
child, usually thought of as punishment for some sin. He’s
really tired; she is intruding. But her daughter’s agony has
become her agony and she is motivated to seek help. We can
imagine her plea: life for both her daughter and herself has
become a living hell. Surely this man with the reputation as
a great healer can help her. She falls at Jesus’ feet and begs
for his help. The worst that can happen is that Jesus will
refuse to help her. But she will never know unless she tries.

Jesus’ response seems strange at best, and rude at worst.
He says “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take
the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Did Jesus just
compare her to a dog? Granted, the Greek word really is
“little dog, or puppy,” but still. This seems to reveal a Jewish
prejudice of long standing: that Gentiles were little better
than dogs. And it seems to give voice to Jesus’
understanding that his mission is to the Jews.

The woman may have been compared to a dog, but she
responds like a lioness protecting her cubs. “Sir, even the
dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” According to Mark, Jesus is impressed by her persistence and her argument, and he heals her child.

The church has pondered this story for years and years. There are those who focus on how Mark, the writer, uses this story. . . . . that it is a rhetorical ploy designed to move the plot along to the final conclusion: the healing of the woman’s daughter. There are those who say Jesus said what he said to test the woman. There are those who say this was a teaching moment for the disciples’ benefit. Those views may all have merit.

But I want to look at Jesus in this story. . . . . not what Mark might have wanted to say. In this story, Jesus is worn out, probably even exhausted. His physical, mental, emotional, even spiritual resources have been spent. He needs peace and quiet and renewal. What if this woman is simply one person too many. What if Jesus’ first response is a way of saying: Get this woman off my back. I can’t deal with one more thing.”

The church has long wrestled with its two affirmations: Jesus’ humanity and Jesus’ divinity. And quite frankly, much of the time the divinity wins. It is not easy to think about Jesus as “fully human.” The way we usually get around that is to say “well, he may have been human, but he
was without sin.” We want Jesus to be pure and clean; we want our Christology to be pleasing. But now and then, someone deals with what it might mean for Jesus to be “fully human.” I read an interesting running conversation about this text on the web and one sermon writer finally concluded, “This may be the closest Jesus ever gets to sinning in the Gospels . . . . assuming that bigotry and rudeness are sins.”

Our UCC Statement of Faith says “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.” We proclaim incarnatio... this notion that God has taken on human form and worked among and through human life. If Jesus shared our common lot, then he was intimately acquainted with the complexities of human life . . . . . and may well have experienced the shame of having said something hurtful to another person because of prejudice.

I am convinced that Jesus not a person who just talked about transformation, about change and new life, and invited other people to be open to it, but also was a person who experienced it! Mark shows us a Jesus who is baptized by John the Baptist, then hears a call from God, then is thrust into the wilderness to be tested and shaped for ministry. Mark takes care of those 40 days in 2 verses. My
suspicion is that it was far more complicated than that; that Jesus was truly tempted by various visions of how he might go about this work . . . that he had to seriously entertain them. His thinking, his conversations, were give and take, back and forth, as with the Syrophoenician woman. And in the end, God’s way won the struggles. But they truly were struggles. Jesus began his ministry as one transformed by his time in the wilderness. And he continued to have some transforming moments . . . . one of those being with the Syrophoenician woman.

I find Jesus much more compelling as a man who wrestled and struggled with the issues of his day than someone who arrived in this world with all the proper attitudes and understandings in place. I find Jesus much more compelling as someone who recognized his wrong and wanted to make it right than as someone who simply manipulated every situation so that he could teach somebody something. I find Jesus much more compelling as someone who didn’t have all the right answers from the get-go, but who was a life-long learner, continually on the way to wholeness.

Kathy Galloway, a former leader of the Iona Community, and a very fine theologian, said this in a sermon she preached in the Iona Abbey in 1987:
“Did Jesus struggle with the choices he made? Every step of the way. Did he find them easy, pleasant, inevitable? Not according to the Gospels. He fought with God and angels and demons, as well as with the great social and political forces. He dissented, groaned, sweated, shouted and despaired. No wonder he needed times of deep solitude . . . . and no wonder he liked parties and feasts so much, when he could simply relax and let things just be. But through all the tension and conflict, he returned again and again to that freedom and that demand which would not let him go. And from the abandonment of all ambition for his own happiness, success and power came the new life of resurrection, in which all that is surrendered is given back in new, mysterious, but real ways.”

Marcus Borg in The Heart of Christianity, sees the Christian life as a life of relationship and transformation. He says, “Being Christian is not about meeting requirements for a future reward in an afterlife, and not very much about believing. Rather, the Christian life is about a relationship with God that transforms life in the present."

I believe that’s how Jesus lived . . . . in a relationship with God that transformed his life in the present, including his relationships with other people. . . . like this Syrophoenician woman. Jesus knew our human life as intimately as one can know it. He opened himself to God as fully as one can do it. And in the end surrendered himself to God’s will and way as
completely he knew how. In that life, God was able to work in and through him in what seemed to people around him to be wondrous and miraculous ways.

Jesus invites us to live this same way: in relationship with God so that we, too, are open to being transformed and made new. Jesus invites us to open ourselves to God as fully as we are able. And when we do that, when we open our lives to God, we just may find that God works in and through us in what other people may find to be wondrous ways.

Soon we will gather around the Table to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The visible signs in this sacrament will be the bread and the cup, but the reality behind them is a relationship . . . this relationship in which Jesus lived and to which Jesus calls us . . . . a relationship with God that offers us grace and can make us new; a relationship with Jesus Christ that creates community and binds us to the people of God in all times and all places. For we are bold enough to proclaim that as we gather about this table, as we remember together, as we pray together, as we eat and drink together, Christ is truly present with us, transforming us, making us new . . . . abiding with us . . . . giving us life. Amen.

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