

“Teachable Moment”

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Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Mark 7:24-37

The Gospel lesson from Mark has two stories in it, and I am going to be focusing on the first story. It tells of Jesus’ encounter with a woman seeking healing for her daughter. And there are a couple of things that the text assumes that we know as we hear this story: we should know that Jesus was seen as the Messiah for the Jewish people – and just for them – the promised savior from God was particular to the Jews; and so we would know that when we hear of a woman who is a Gentile (that is, not a Jew) – and specifically a Syrophenician, a Canaanite who was an enemy of the Jews – then we know that the Messiah has nothing to do with her. You can like those assumptions or not, but it gives the setting for the story to be told and heard...

You have an idea of what a ‘teachable moment’ is, right? – a circumstance in which a particular event or experience opens up an opportunity for learning – not in a way that was necessarily planned, but just a situation that presents itself as ripe for insight. It’s the sort of thing that can happen in so many different ways – it can be as silly and simple as a child’s first brain freeze when eating a slushy too fast (you say ‘ooh – you might want to slow down a little next time...’) or as serious and significant as the first time a child is a witness to discrimination/cruelty in her or his world (you say – ‘yes, that makes me upset too; it’s not how people are supposed to treat each other’). And I use a child as an example because that is often what we are looking for as parents, grandparents, teachers, mentors – the times we recognize as moments to teach children something that they need to navigate

their world well – that’s important. But it’s also easier for me to use a child as an example because it’s usually more fun to be on the teacher side of a teachable moment than on the learning side of it – there’s something in me that can resist being on the learning side, even though there’s plenty for me to learn in life. And maybe that has mostly to do with how it is done – as with most things, a teachable moment can be handled graciously or smugly – can feel to the learner that they are being nurtured by it or having her or his nose rubbed in it.

Teachable moments – do you think Jesus had any? Not as the teacher, but as the learner... it seems to me that the Gospel story today tells us about a teachable moment for Jesus. Which is, of course, not usually how it goes – Jesus is the one who comes across moments ripe for insight: the disciples argue about who’s the greatest – teachable moment; a religious expert asks ‘who is my neighbor?’, a crowd is prepared to stone a woman – teachable moments.

But in this story – something different. Jesus is traveling and teaching – he is becoming well-known and the crowds are starting to become too much. Jesus is hoping to hide out for a bit, but he is found by this woman – this Gentile – this person Jesus was not interested in – she was not a part of his constituency; this woman, whose daughter is not well – this woman, who insists on seeing Jesus – this mother, who begs for healing for her daughter. Jesus replies: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”. That Jesus says this crushing statement is surprising enough, but what is more surprising is that this woman responds: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” And

Jesus has his teachable moment... “For saying that you may go – the demon has left your daughter.”

There is plenty to unpack there – but let’s start with this: although we do not like what Jesus said, he was right; but the problem was he was also wrong. ‘Jesus was wrong’ – is that OK to say? – am I allowed to say that? What about Jesus being perfect – without sin? Well, those are important doctrines to know and affirm, but they are not the questions at stake in this story. What we are simply told here is that Jesus is on a mission but under pressure – feeling hounded, wanting a break – he’s allowed; and he’s going to teach this woman a lesson and he tells her the facts – which is when we come up against Jesus being right, but wrong. And what I mean by that is that there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom, a difference even between the facts and the truth (I know that can sound dangerous in this political season, but hear me out). You can be right about something, but not be wise in how you use it; you can know something, but miss the truth within it.

Jesus is right – he knows his mission and his facts about who this woman is and what his obligations are; but Jesus is wrong to stop there – and Jesus receives from this woman the gift of wisdom. What wisdom? The wisdom of seeing a person rather than a category; the truth of compassion trumping correctness. It’s so interesting to have this story alongside the Proverbs and James readings today, as they speak of this need for wisdom: seeing life and people not in categories and calculations; the blessing that comes from valuing faithfulness over status; the need to have actions match beliefs. Jesus needed that wisdom in that moment – and this woman/mother/person offered it to him. And Jesus, to his credit,

acknowledges, receives this wisdom, and his healing ministry is extended to her house as well.

An unusual story – a teachable moment for Jesus...and for us? Let's not make it about a systematic theology of Jesus' sinless-ness or even a salvation theology that extends to Gentiles like us. Let's simply take the wisdom the story offers and see how it speaks to us – and let's listen to it here at the table. After all, the exchange between Jesus and this woman is all about the table – 'feeding the children'; 'crumbs for the children' – not our typical communion images, but a connection we can make.

Connected in this way – let me ask you: is the substance of this sacrament knowledge or wisdom? Do we come here because of what we know or what we need? Well, there is nothing wrong with being right and there is nothing wrong with knowledge. Don't anybody hear me dissing knowing things – no anti-intellectualism here – knowing stuff is good. But it is only part of the story – not the complete picture. The challenge of faith and the substance of wisdom is to have what we know serve what is life-giving. It is about taking what we know and nourishing it with the wisdom of grace and compassion, the wisdom of humility and gratitude. That is the wisdom of God we need to nurture our knowledge, our faith, even, into faithfulness.

Teachable moments for myself take some practice for me to receive graciously – humbly – but there are some teachable moments I hear for myself in this story, and perhaps they speak to you as well. I hear that in the midst of dealing with issues – issues that are important and that deal with what I know and believe, even with what is right and wrong – I need in the midst of issues to realize they are not just issues, they are about people, and people deserve compassion and grace from me no matter what – that is

wisdom. I hear that in the midst of dealing with resistance that I encounter, with difference that confronts or opposes me, with actions that oppose or threaten me – that in that resistance and difference and threat, there is a story, a reason, a person, even – that is wisdom. I don't just want to be right, I want wisdom – those are the crumbs I need.

As we are fed from the table today – receive the meal not only because of what we know, but for what we need: to be nourished in the wisdom of compassion and grace. And as we go from this table, use that nourishment in the days ahead not just to be right, but to be faithful, living out the wisdom of God's healing ways with all we meet. AMEN.