

***Away from the Crowd***

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Text: Mark 7:24-37

focus: human Jesus models a helpless, frustrated, yet strangely empowered ministry

function: Empower us to be (fully human) ministers while helpless and frustrated

The great heresy of the church today is that we refuse to recognize Jesus' humanity. We see Jesus as mostly divine, and a little human.

"Yes he walked, and talked, and ate, and slept -- just like us -- and he died as a human, but the whole time he knew he was God and he did God-things -- miracles and stuff -- and he had the plan and he held the power, not like us... certainly not weak, or helpless, or frustrated like we get. Right?"

Another group many years ago tried to explain this divine/human thing. They said that though Jesus was both human and divine, his divine nature prevailed. As though Jesus' human nature was subsumed into his divine nature like a drop of dye into the ocean. [see Monophysites]

It's tempting to nod in agreement.

I mean, it's hard to blame us, with creeds that talk about Jesus by saying:

"God from God; Light from Light; True God from True God; begotten, not made; of one substance with the Father..."

And for those of us who are following the lectionary we've had about 6 weeks in John chapter 6, where Jesus is talking all about how he is the bread of heaven, come down from the Father. Which emphasizes Jesus' connection to God, and makes him harder to identify with the average Joe or Jane.

We worship Jesus in his divinity, not his humanity... right?

No, that's wrong.

We worship Jesus as he was handed down to us by faithful witnesses and as we have met him by the power of the Spirit -- fully human, and fully God.

100% human, 100% divine. (That drives math folks crazy).  
It can drive anyone crazy who tries to hold it all together.  
So, we call it a paradox. And we explore it.

These stories from Mark that we read today give us a human Jesus. Mark shows us a Jesus who is tired, frustrated, helpless, reluctant, and yet strangely empowered.

Our story begins with Jesus just wanting to get away.

[v24]: "From there he set out and went to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there."

Have you ever wanted to just get away?

To get away from the crowds, from the noise, from the advertising, from the demands? From the clamouring voices that may be people or they may be just things in your life, or thoughts in your head?

I think Jesus just wanted to get away. He's been teaching and working miracles and gaining a lot of attention -

First he casts out an unclean spirit while teaching in the synagogue, and his fame begins to spread

Right from there he heals Simon's mother-in-law at Simon's house, and the whole city gathers at the door with the sick and demon possessed.

The next morning Jesus slips away very early while it's still dark to get some quiet time, but his disciples hunt him down, and when they find him they remind him: "Everyone's looking for you!"

Then he heals a leper, and even though Jesus tells him to tell no one, he proclaims it freely so that it says, "he could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country" (1:45).

And that's just the first chapter of Mark!

From there he is found surrounded by great crowds to the point where it says a couple times there were so many people and demands that they "could not even eat" (3:20, 6:31).

But wait a minute... isn't this good?

All the crowds, and the attention, and the success? Isn't this exactly what Jesus wants here? Wouldn't we welcome all these crowds, and we'd say "Go tell your friends! Bring them to church!"

Apparently it's not what Jesus wants, because he's trying to get away from the crowd. I think for a couple reasons:

- 1) He's tired. He's human, and he's tired and he needs some space.
- 2) Crowds are not communities. They gather for events, for entertainment, to see something remarkable... but more popularity does not necessarily mean more transformation. (willow creek community church, a church in the chicago suburbs that was attracting thousands, discovered this -- and addressed it head on, to their credit). And Jesus knows that the crowds will not save him from his upcoming death - and maybe he suspects that many of the same people will gather for that spectacle as well.

For whatever reason, he's trying to get away from the crowd.

But a woman comes to him in his hiding place, begging for mercy on her daughter. And this woman isn't even in his job description. She's not part of Israel -- she's a gentile, from the coastlands -- a descendent of the Canaanites, whom Israel (way back) had scattered and destroyed in their conquest--a God-given conquest, I might add, as moral retribution on the sins of the people and the land.

Which is to say she comes with NOTHING to recommend her. She has no merits. No reasons Jesus should consider her. And all strikes against her, quite frankly. And yet she comes:

[vv. 25-27]:

"Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch.

As you can imagine, a dog is not a very nice thing to call somebody -- and it plays into strong racial stereotypes of the day.

I suppose Jesus could have been setting all of this up as a teaching moment for his disciples... and he really did know what was going to happen and he was already planning on doing the healing, and he wants to test the woman's faith... Except that Mark makes a point to tell us that "he did not want anyone to know he was there".

Making room for Jesus' humanity, I believe on a very real level this was a stinging rebuke meant not only to turn her away, but to keep her from telling others. If we allow Jesus to be human, we can allow for some frustration and annoyance on his part.

This is where the woman shines as the hero of this story. She does not get defensive or slink off ashamed, but instead her reply demonstrates faith, hope, and love -- resolved faith to persevere, desperate hope that he had the power to heal, and fierce love that would humbly and ably do anything for the life of her daughter:

"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

A powerful and moving response.

And it seems to move Jesus too. Because he responds,

"For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter."

No evil can abide that kind of faith, hope, and love.

The teacher in this story, the rabbi, is the woman. She is our teacher. She is the disciples' teacher. And quite likely, she is also Jesus' teacher. Because away from the crowd of Israelites, to whom he has been sent, Jesus is able to see a foreign woman's great faith and finds the strange power within offering healing, in spite of his response, beyond what was prescribed and understood. Beyond the children of Israel -- or should we say, The children beyond Israel.

Away from the crowd we are able to see the "other" and witness the great faith that connects us to one God.

From there Jesus goes back, and they bring to him a deaf man who has trouble speaking, and beg for his healing. The first thing Jesus does is to take him away from the crowd.

[READ v33]

Jesus is not interested in this man's healing as a spectacle to garner attention -- a marketing scheme. Rather, he is interested in his personal well being--his wholeness. So he takes him away from the crowd.

And then he does some very human things: [READ vv33-35].

He puts his fingers in his ears.

He spits.

He touches his tongue.

Beyond just a conventional healing method of the day, this establishes Jesus' humanity in connection to his healing.

And he sighs. He sighs.

This sighing business seems to be very human indeed. The nonverbal expression of some deep emotion that seeks release. There are a few other times in the New Testament where this word is used, and they are all connected to exasperation, grumbling, or groaning.

Mark doesn't tell us what emotion Jesus is experiencing that brings him to sigh; but what a human thing to do!

[READ vv34-36]

It seems that Jesus is caught up in something greater -- that he is helpless to keep the people from spreading news about him. This thing is moving faster than he can keep up - differently than he thought, maybe?

Couldn't the same one who ordered the deaf man's ears to be opened and his tongue to be loosed, order the people to be silent?

Apparently not.

"the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it."

Jesus, who spoke healing from God, also was helpless as a man - yet part of something greater

Friends, we are also invited into something greater.

Like the woman and man, lets meet Jesus away from the crowd.

The crowd is often dehumanizing. The crowd is the blacks, the Mexicans, the gays, the whites, the Fundies, the Mormons, the rich, the poor... Away from the crowd, we begin to see the other's humanity, and the great faith that connects them to God as much as us. Away from the crowd--away from the voices that try to define us -- we can find healing in the presence of Christ.

Lets allow ourselves to be led away from the crowd.  
Allow ourselves to find Jesus away from the crowd.  
Apart from what everyone's saying.  
Apart from the thoughts that clamour.  
Apart from the things that overwhelm.  
Allow yourself to be touched by Jesus. To talk to Jesus. To argue with Jesus. To find healing.

And like Jesus, let's be encouraged wherever we are in life to let ourselves be led into something greater, even as we experience very real human emotions.  
Even as we are tired, frustrated, helpless, overwhelmed, hard-pressed, perplexed...  
we can allow that strange healing power to serve the needs of those around us, in spite of us.

Thanks be to God.