

## Mark 7:24-37

The two stories in today's reading show the limits of Jesus' power. First he's caught out being less than compassionate, and trying to exclude someone from his mission, and she sets him straight. Right after that, he uses his power effectively to heal a man whose hearing and speech had been impaired—but he cannot influence him or anybody else to keep quiet about it. There's some wisdom for us in these stories, I think, having to do with imperfection.

In the first story, Jesus has left Galilee and gone to Tyre, which is in modern-day Lebanon. Mark makes it sound like he deliberately went away from Jewish territory because he needed a break, because it says, "He entered a house and did not want anybody to know that he was there." But of course, he could not avoid the antennae of a desperate mother whose daughter was gravely ill; when your kid is sick, you're on hyper-alert for whatever relief might be out there. Somehow she heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. There goes the little retreat that Jesus had been counting on.

That is really the only excuse I can think of for his behavior—that Jesus is just a little burnt out, and in this moment frustrated that his downtime has been snatched away from him. His words are cruel: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Maybe people in antiquity like her were used to hearing insults, but it is not what we expect from Jesus. And in fact, to appeal to cultural divisions as somehow substantive in God's eyes is inconsistent with things in Jesus' recent past. In his own parable of the sower, Jesus had taught that the seeds of the kingdom are cast indiscriminately and that those who are expected to perceive it properly turn out to be ignorant, slow, and hard of heart. The Kingdom of God plays by nobody's rules but God's.<sup>1</sup> We've also seen that Jesus does not

control the spread of God's kingdom: he has earlier experienced the power coming out of him, when the woman with a flow of blood touched the hem of his garment in the midst of a crowd. So he really does know better. And in fact, he corrects himself immediately, as soon as she answers him back: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." He tells her that for saying that, she can go, because the demon has left her daughter.

It may not have been in this mother's religious tradition, but in Jesus' religious tradition arguing with God is well established. Remember how Abraham argued God down from destroying Sodom once by asking God to spare the city if there were just 50 righteous men in it, and then when God agreed, Abraham kept whittling the number down until God just gave up? And there was a time when the people built a golden calf to worship and God had had enough and proposed wiping them out and starting again. Moses argued with God on that occasion, and changed God's mind.

There is a mandate in Judaism to wrestle with God on ethical grounds. The Zohar, a Kabbalistic text that emerged in 13th c. Spain, compares Noah unfavorably to Moses. Moses had argued for the people, but when God told Noah to build a boat to save his family while the rest of creation would perish, Noah simply complied. As the Zohar notes, "Noah did not plea for mercy on behalf of the world, and they all perished, because the Holy One, blessed be God, had told him that he and his children would be saved by the ark." (Zohar 1:67b) In other words, Noah didn't lobby on behalf of everyone else because he and his were going to be OK.<sup>ii</sup>

Noah's complicity is so bad, the Zohar notes, that he is to be named for it the whole rest of history: "Because Noah did not plead for them, the Flood waters are named after him, as it is written (and here the Zohar quotes Isaiah 54:9 as its prooftext): 'for this is as the waters of

Noah to Me; as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth.” (Ibid.) Noah had a moral responsibility to talk back to God and try to prevent the Flood, and he didn’t do it.

So the lesson I’m taking here is that if God can be argued with, if God can change God’s mind, Jesus knows that he can too. Jesus knows that he can be wrong, and that when you’re wrong you should change your mind. We should not emulate Jesus’ peevishness, or his resort to cultural barriers. The inspiration for us here is his willingness to turn on a dime and do the right thing when he realizes he’s been wrong. The theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman once said, "To be victimized by error but to continue making choices of integrity is to grow in grace." [also this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU>]

The next thing we know, Jesus has left Tyre and returned to Galilee, where someone brings to him a deaf man with an impediment in his speech. Jesus does more than lay his hands on him; he touches the parts that he’s healing, sighs deeply, and says, “Be opened.” Sure enough, the man’s ears are opened, his tongue is loosened, and he speaks plainly. So right away Jesus does what he always does in Mark’s gospel, which is to tell the man he’s just healed not to talk about it. “But the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.”

Again, Jesus is clearly not fully in charge of his life! He makes this one simple request, and absolutely nobody takes any notice. It’s got to be so frustrating, no wonder he needed a retreat. The man’s friends are “astounded beyond measure,” and they say, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” I think I’ve mentioned before that Mark’s gospel has Jesus really trying to keep quiet the idea that he’s the messiah, and people have various theories about why that is, but the theory that really resonates with

me is that in Mark, all the people who ought to understand what Jesus is about, don't. So Jesus is constantly going, "They're going to misunderstand this, they're going to focus on me as embodying the reign of God, and they're going to miss the fact that they're called to participate in the reign of God. So let me try to get them just not to spread this news at all, because it'll be the wrong news."<sup>iii</sup> Jesus keeps trying to show people the kingdom, and they keep just looking at him, like when you point at a ball you threw for your dog and the dog looks at you.

Sometimes Mercury just goes into retrograde, and we have to live through it. Even Jesus. These are two stories in a row which testify to this! But I really do love how Jesus is not knocked off balance either time. It reminds me of something some Buddhist teacher said, when people were asking how you can possibly detach from your emotions when tragedies occur. This teacher said that you don't ever want to be numb to your feelings, because that's just pathology. You want to *feel* your feelings, but maintain equilibrium. *Feel* your grief or anxiety or guilt, but stay grounded while you feel them. I see Jesus staying grounded in the bedrock that God can redeem anything. If Jesus screws up, God can redeem it. If Jesus fails to communicate how his healings should be received, God can redeem that too. It's this grounding in God that gives Jesus the flexibility to recognize his own mistake immediately, when the mother pushes him to heal her daughter. He doesn't cling to ego and double down on his argument in order to protect himself. He changes his mind; he acknowledges tacitly that he was **wrong**. Jesus can be flexible because God is reliable.

Let me repeat what Howard Thurston said, because it's so great: "To be victimized by error but to continue making choices of integrity is to grow in grace." Sometimes we fear making a decision because it might be a mistake . . . but there are some decisions that will not

have a happy outcome either way, like what to do in Afghanistan, and we have to risk making a mistake, risk being victimized by error. To take on that responsibility *and* learn with equanimity from our mistakes is indeed a gift of grace, predicated on the fact that God is good.

Let us pray:

Teacher Jesus, who taught thousands  
And yet were willing to learn from the least of these,  
We confess that we pretend to know  
When in truth we still wonder.

It is hard for us to live in generous love and sometimes realize that we have been fools.  
Help us to care for one another unself-consciously  
And follow in the example you set for us.  
In your name we pray. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-mark-724-37-4>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/what-a-prophet-isnt> Danya Ruttenberg, „Life is a Sacred Text”

<sup>iii</sup> By attempting over and over to make Jesus ‘the Messiah,’ people were missing the point of his message, which was that the Reign of God was present and that they all were invited to *participate* in it. **As long as they had the Messiah to embody the reign, they were missing the participation part.** To ‘follow’ is not to point to, observe, marvel, coronate, or even profess. It is more about joining along, taking up the message, indeed taking up the cross that is central to the message, and “believing” by living in the present reign of God. It is healing the sick, delivering those who are oppressed, etc. . . . Mark saw Jesus trying to re-direct his message away from himself and toward following-as-participating.

<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/07/mission-grounded-in-rejection.html>