

Year B, Pentecost 16 Proper 18b

September 9th, 2018

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Mark 7:24-30

To Take Offense or Not, That Is the Question

The text for today begins with, “From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre.” Where is the “from there” the text refers to?

They had been in their home territory amidst their own Jewish people and under pressure from their own leaders who were critical that Jesus and his disciples had not been zealous enough in washing their hands before they ate. When the leaders confronted Jesus about this, Jesus called them hypocrites because he said, quoting Isaiah, their lips spoke of honoring God but their hearts weren’t into it. In Matthew’s version of the story, the disciples later tell Jesus that the Pharisees had been offended when he called them hypocrites. Hang on to this point. It will prove helpful as the story develops.

So now they are moving on, leaving the offended Jewish leaders behind and traveling to Tyre, a totally non-Jewish area to the west of Galilee.

In Tyre “he entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.” We know it was the house of a Gentile because there were no Jewish homes in the area. We also know Jews were not allowed to enter Gentile homes so Jesus is again breaking the rules. While there “he could not escape notice” and “a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him.” This woman came and bowed down at his feet. “The woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin.”

From a Jewish point of view she is an outsider, a person of no account and a woman. And she has a daughter with an unclean spirit. For devout Jews she comes with several strikes against her.

This may be stretching it but for what it is worth, I take having an unclean spirit to mean there were relational problems between this mother and this little daughter. The mother has labeled “the unclean spirit” as residing in the daughter. I think they have a relational block frustrating the intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship. Maybe it is un-forgiveness, a power struggle between them, or un-recognized voices in the present or the past that distort their relationship. Those Latino children forcibly separated from their parents are going to have some unclean spirits poured into them. They will likely be full of rage. This can happen even between a small child and a parent. As long as a parent sees the problem as totally the child’s problem and does not place it in the context of their relationship, both will remain stuck.

But to her credit, this mother is desperate and turns to Jesus, an outsider, for help. The text says, she “begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.” Her coming to Jesus and fighting for her daughter acknowledges that she is at the end of her rope and doesn’t know what to do. To admit there is a problem is half the battle. All of this is conjecture on my part and the story may not support this interpretation. Back to the story.

Jesus’ response surprises us but probably not her. She knew how Jews felt toward Gentiles. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” It’s almost as offensive as asking his disciples to chew on his flesh and drink his blood. He tells her he has a responsibility to feed his own people first and since she is not one of his people, she and her daughter are no better than a dog to him. It sounds like hate speech, doesn’t it.

I got to thinking about the importance of dogs in human families. In most families, if you have a dog or two it’s clear who is lowest in the family hierarchy: Fido. It’s reassuring to know that we will never slip lower than our canine friends—they provide the bottom rung. Perhaps this hints at our fear of being in the dog house, or treated like a dog, or leading a dog’s life. No matter who we are, we can feel good about ourselves as humans because we are better than the dogs.

I remember being on my parent’s farm a few years ago and carrying out the dishwater that had gravy scrapes in it and throwing it on the zinnias outside the door to water them. Izzie and Dolly immediately pushed the flowers aside to lick up the scraps. In my childhood on the farm, if we gave dogs any meat at all it was often mixed with dishwater, discarded pie crust and melted jello and they didn’t seem to mind. It appears dogs have no dignity. So to say “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” is a low blow and a huge putdown.

How will this foreign woman respond? Will she take offense? “She answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’” The woman does not take offense and instead addresses Jesus with respect.

In last week’s text, the Pharisees notice that some of Jesus’ disciples did not wash their hands before eating. In response Jesus calls them hypocrites who insist the outside be clean while filth drains from their hearts. They don’t like hearing this and reject Jesus. Who does he think he is talking to us like that?

Now in this week’s text, Jesus says something that the woman could experience as equally offensive, but she does not take offense. David McCracken, in “The Scandal of the Gospels” notes “The Pharisees are offended; the Canaanite woman is not. The stark contrast is revelatory; for the opposite of offense is faith, but the only way to faith is through the

possibility of offense...The central issue is offense versus faith. And it is posed in a highly offensive way: pious and law-abiding Pharisees lack faith, and a Gentile dog has great faith.”

We are always trying to tame Jesus. But he is wild and comes from another place even though he was born of Mary.

She accepts the offense of being on a lower plane than Jesus. After all, he is the Son of God and shares equal footing with God and she is not, she is a child of God who has trouble in her relationships—even with her little daughter. He is the Creator and she is the created. That is a reality all humans must accept if they are to find healing. But we humans find it offensive to be put down like that. We want to make ourselves equal with God and on the same order of creation. For humans the defining duality is “us” and “them.” For Jesus there is another duality and it is different from “us” and “them.” This duality is “the created” and “the creator.” Sometimes he has to offend us to get humans to see that we are not God,. This is why he said chew on my flesh and drink my blood. This is why he quotes Isaiah and uses it to call the Pharisees hypocrites. He must get humans off our self-appointed pedestals before we will be able to see him as the Son of God. It is only when he is our Lord that we can unite under him, model ourselves after him and find our peace. Our peace comes when we no longer rival each other because we know he is Lord and we are not. Yet in his Lordship, he has given himself totally to us and for us. This foreign woman, desperate for a relationship with her daughter, has chosen to bow before Jesus rather than be scandalized by him. It’s a choice that leads to the healing of her relationship with her daughter.

Are we willing to bow before him, taking no offense, so that our relationships, both personal and international, can heal? He once said “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

The Syrophenician woman, unlike the Pharisees, took no offense, saying “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Without skipping a beat Jesus responds, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.” Amen.