

Mark 7:24-37
September 5, 2021

“Wrong Again”
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

Jesus was wrong.

Yes, you heard me correctly. **Jesus was wrong.** Not just wrong, but really wrong. Dead wrong. Embarrassingly wrong.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus is approached by a Greek woman, a Syrophenician, meaning she was a Gentile (non-Jew) from Syria. The woman's daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit. And she takes it upon herself to approach the one whose reputation as a great healer precedes him. This unnamed woman recalls the wonderful quote from Laural Thatcher Ulrich: “*Well behaved women seldom make history.*” Like Shirley Maclaine's character in *Terms of Endearment*, this woman will stop at nothing to ensure her daughter's health and well-being, even if it means breaking social protocol.

Jesus, at first, refuses her request. “The children have to be fed first. It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.” In other words, Jesus is saying that his mission on earth was to a select group of people, whom he often referred to as his “children.” It is not fair for an outsider, a “dog” to demand attention at the expense of those whom Jesus came to minister.

Despite Jesus' rudeness, the woman cleverly retorts, “even dogs under the table get the crumbs which the children toss.” The woman is not looking for a loaf of bread. Or a three-course meal. She understands that all her daughter requires from this healer is just a small fragment of his attention. This woman's faith in Jesus is that he is 1) so powerful that even the “crumbs” he offers can be a nutritious meal and 2) that such a small portion of his attention could hardly distract him from his mission and purpose.

I once had the great pleasure of hearing the fabulous preacher, Fred Craddock, give a sermon at a prominent church in Amarillo, Texas. Rev. Craddock is one of those great Christian orators that young seminarians, such as myself, study in hopes gaining insight into what it means to artfully preach the word of God. I can't remember anything about Fred Craddock's sermon on that day. I don't recall if it was particularly good. Or inspiring. All I remember is that I had the good fortune to be in the presence of homiletical greatness; even the crumbs from Fred Craddock's sermons are enough to fill baskets of Christian thought and insight for years to come. You have probably felt the same way about being in the presence of a gifted musician, artist, humanitarian, or leader.

Being wrong is one of the universal experiences of the human condition. I joke that I hate being wrong. But the truth is, I'm frequently wrong. We all are. We confuse fact and fiction. We enter the wrong meeting times on our calendar. We think we are pursuing the

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best path for ourselves and our families. We believe we are acting as Jesus’ faithful followers.

But we are often wrong. Dead wrong. Embarrassingly wrong.

And it’s in these times when we are wrong when it’s comforting to know we have a confidant in Jesus. Because Jesus knows exactly what it feels like to be mistaken. That’s one of the drawbacks of being “fully human” as well as “fully divine.” You get the good with the bad. Jesus suffers all the pain and embarrassments that human beings endure every day of their lives.

As one theologian points out, “To be the Son of God, the Messiah, [Jesus] must suffer, not only at the hands of those of us who do not understand him, but also under of the conditions of existence, the challenge of the human condition itself. To be otherwise would not allow Jesus to be fully human.”¹

One of the essential beliefs of our Christian faith is that we proclaim Jesus to be fully human AND fully divine. Jesus did not simply wear a human “costume.” Jesus was not some galactic shape-shifter or droid that only mimicked human characteristics. Jesus was fully human. Which means he was tired. Cranky. Angry. Lonely. Sad. Happy. And, on occasion, wrong.

Jesus is clearly divine and can do only what God can do—forgive sins and control nature. In this episode he is portrayed as fully human, needing to learn from another human being—a Gentile woman at that. In this, Jesus serves as a model for the disciples, who also need to learn about the expansive nature of the rule of God.”²

Jesus was wrong—but he did not sin. How so? Because Jesus instantly realized his error. And he never strayed from his initial mission of preaching God’s love and salvation to the people of Israel. This mission stays intact. But this Syrophenian woman challenges Jesus’ own understanding of what his mission is all about. And, through her clever retort, Jesus’s own eyes and ears are opened. Through the bold testimony of this woman, Jesus understands that his mission is not just a select group of people, but to the entire world.

¹ Bartlett, David L.; Taylor, Barbara Brown (2011-05-31). *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4, Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)* (Kindle Locations 1724-1729). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

² Petersen, David L.; O'Day, Gail R. (2010-11-05). *Theological Bible Commentary* (pp. 316-317). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

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The Christian church, including our own congregation here in Topeka, Kansas, tends to experience the same kind of tunnel vision exhibited by Jesus. We know we are called to minister to the world, and yet, finite resources often dictate to whom we minister. We understand we are called to serve the world, but we insist on focusing our ministries on the people who are in the pews and on the membership rolls. We are content to feed ourselves with loaves of abundance and offer only crumbs to the outsiders.

As a minister, I struggle with this reality often. Like Jesus, I see my mission tied to a particular community (Trinity Presbyterian Church.) And like Jesus, I also know that there are others not in our congregation that need healing, justice, and freedom. I am called, first and foremost, to minister to this community. Any other crumbs I can throw from the table are just a bonus. And, like Jesus, I’m also wrong. Because the gospel of Jesus Christ isn’t limited to a special group of followers. The good news of Jesus is for everyone. Jesus’ eyes were opened to just how expansive his ministry could be. And Jesus himself realized that all are called to receive the bread and sit at the table. No longer shall anyone feast upon mere crumbs. Whenever we seek to feed those with the bread of life, the Spirit will always make sure that the bread is there, in abundance, so that everyone can feast to their heart’s content.

Being wrong never felt so right. Thanks be to God. †