

Mark 7: 24-30

⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre.^[g] He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ 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.”²⁸ But she answered him, “Sir,^[h] even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”²⁹ Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

When I was in Seminary, I actually got into an argument with some of my classmates in my Second Testament class over this particular passage. It was almost as good as the fight during Hebrew Bible class over the snake in the Garden of Eden debate, but in this particular discussion no punches were thrown although it did get pretty heated for a while. And what did I dare say that caused an uprising between the progressives and the conservatives in my class? I dared to state, that for me, this

particular scripture passage that we read today showed me a very significant time when Jesus changed his mind.

My classmate felt that I was saying that Jesus was admitting that he made a mistake and he could not have made a mistake because he was the infallible son of our infallible God. I said changing one's mind about something was not saying the originally held idea was a mistake...it is just that, changing one's mind, and I for one was particularly glad if Jesus and God could and did change their minds about things because it showed the ability to act with compassion and mercy as a situation dictated and not just with retributive judgment.

All these years later, I don't remember the outcome of this particular fracas, but as I had the opportunity to read this scripture again this week, I found that I still felt the same way about it, that this was a day that Jesus changed his mind. Will you pray with me please?

May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Today's story from Mark gives us a snapshot into a day in the life of a very worn out and tired Jesus. He had been preaching and teaching and healing non-stop and he decides to get the heck out

of Dodge, or at least out of the Galilean area. Our reading tells us that he went to the region of Tyre, which means next to nothing to us today, but early believers would have understood that this meant that he went into pagan territory, foreign land with foreign people, and for the early Christians THAT was the shocking news.

This is truly one of the few times when Jesus made a move someplace that we don't get a sense of an agenda for his travels other than he just needed to get away, he wanted to be someplace where people did not know him so he could get some rest.

That makes what happens next all the more interesting because he is found out and pursued, not by his own people but by a Gentile woman who begs Jesus to heal her daughter from a demon. The response is probably Jesus as his most human, snarkiest, rudest self. He basically calls the woman, her daughter, and all Gentiles, dogs and refuses to heal the little girl.

Ouch, you kind of want to step back from this Jesus don't you? This is not kind, gentle, Jesus, this is not "divine" Jesus; this is "fully human" Jesus at his fully human worse. It is also possibly one of the most ironic moments in his ministry. To truly understand the irony we have to go back to the start of chapter 7 in Mark. I told you that Jesus was tired and worn out and a lot of

that was because he had been having another one of his infamous go-rounds with the Pharisees who had been after him about the table laws of the time...what is “clean and unclean” the idea being that Jews and Gentiles could not sit down at the table together to share a meal because Gentiles were “unclean”....they didn’t wash their hand correctly before eating...And now that they thought about it, Jesus and his band of disciples didn’t wash their hands the right way either.

This whole clean and unclean thing was more than having a meal together...it was all about the “Law” of God and it was very exclusive...only those who did everything the “righteous way” could possibly be worthy of a relationship with God. Jesus of course would have none of that. Once again he tried to tell the Pharisees that God’s love was not about rules, it was about love. It was not about exclusion it was about inclusion, wonderful, far-flung inclusion.

And now, just a few days after that conversation, Jesus is faced with this Syrian woman who is asking to have her daughter healed. And he reacts in a very exclusive manner.

What we have to remember here is that Jesus and the disciples understood a very traditional call to his purpose here on earth, a purpose that dated back to the prophets of the Old Testament.

That was, that Jesus came to earth to bring the people of Israel back to God, just the people of Israel that was how he defined himself and his ministry. But standing before him on this day is a woman, a mother, who is not a Jew, but a Gentile; she has broken with the custom of the day and all by herself, sought him out, to ask for healing on behalf of her daughter. And when Jesus so rudely refuses her instead of backing down, she boldly responds. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

There, there it is...the moment that the fully human Jesus has a come to Jesus moment, he comes face to face with himself...it is as if in that moment that Jesus realizes that in the midst of his humanity, in his physical and mental exhaustion that maybe he has lost sight of the point of everything he has been saying and doing, and in this moment, he is reconnected to it by someone that he assumed to be an outsider. It is a Gentile woman, not a Jewish disciple or believer who rebukes Jesus, a Gentile woman who teaches him, the Jewish man, the Messiah, the true meaning of what he has just been fighting over with the Pharisees. This woman stands in front of him daring to remind him that he needs to practice what he preaches; that social conventions should not stand in the way of helping those in need. That God’s love is about more than rules.

The narrative today makes it sound like Jesus had an immediate response to the woman, but I bet it wasn't. I bet they stood there toe to toe with eyes locked on each other, both of them pretty darn sure that they were each going to get their own way, waiting for the other person to back down. It may have taken a minute, but then Jesus got it, he hears the words that the woman has spoken, he hears again the exchange he just had with the Pharisees and he gets it, it's the same thing and his mind is changed and he tells her, "for saying that, you may go; -the demon has left your daughter."

Jesus changed his mind and it leaves me wondering here today what do we need to change our minds about? In the United Church of Christ, here at Greenbelt Community Church, every Sunday morning we say "whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." The reality is that as Christians we forget the extravagant welcome behind those words and we have not always done a good job of accepting and welcoming "the other", whether the other is a woman, or a foreigner, or a member of a different racial or ethnic group, another religion, someone whose gender identity is different from ours, or maybe even, shall I say it...Caitlyn Jenner... As Christians we may find that deep down we still look at some people as "unclean" or "unworthy" to be fully included at the feast.

We make judgments about issues, about people , about church, about how things should be that go against the very tenets of our faith, that whole part about loving God and loving our neighbors ... in so many ways; we need to hear what we are saying, really hear what we are saying just like Jesus did in today's story. We need to have our eyes and our ears and our hearts opened up to God at work in the world...

How important is it to have a change of heart, a change of mind? Well, in the case of today's story, it should mean the world to us because it was from this point that Jesus opened up the meaning of his ministry to move beyond the Israelites and to include the teaching of God's good news and extravagant love to the world. We are the church because Jesus changed his mind.

My challenge to you this week is to find one thing to let the teachings of the wonderfully inclusive, mind-changing Jesus change your mind about, one thing that moves you from exclusive to inclusive. Find one thing and do it. Amen