

September 6, 2015

Mark 7: 24-30

Three years ago Vicki and I returned from our four month sabbatical which included a trip to the National Parks of the American Southwest. We were flying under the radar. No one knew who we were, except for our Quebec licence plate. We were on our own, incognito. No demands or responsibilities, just ourselves and our itinerary. It was a rare luxury for us.

And then it happened! We were in the Badlands; the last park on our list. We had successfully kept to ourselves for weeks. We were sitting on our Roots chairs, 150 feet out from our motel facing a barbed wire fence. There we sipped some red wine, listened to all the birds and watched a small herd of deer in the expanse of wild grassland prairie on the other side of the fence. Well that was suspicious behaviour, and soon an elderly man staying at the motel ventured over to check us out. He was retired Navy. Well, he soon discovered that I was a minister and Vicki was one too. He was a southern Baptist from Georgia. To explain how we both were ministers, we revealed the theological stance of the United Church of Canada. That was an eye opener! Now, if I was going to be interrupted then I wasn't going to pull any punches, so soon the topic turned to politics, and then to sexual orientation...

Unexpectedly he asked *“Where can we find a church like yours in the States?”* He went back to his room and returned with his own collapsible chair and we shared faith and hopes and fears and healing of a deep and subtle sort. It felt like a modern day version of our Gospel lesson.

In our Gospel reading today, **Jesus** takes an extensive trip. He takes a break from the press of people seeking healing. He takes a time out from the ongoing hassles with the authorities. **Jesus** breaks away and literally leaves the country.

From **Genessaret** on the eastern shore of the **Sea of Galilee**, he journeys west through **Galilee** into **Phoenicia**, along the coast of the **Mediterranean Sea**, up to the ancient port of **Tyre** in **Greater Syria**, now known as **Southern Lebanon**. Not even **Israel's** King David embraced this territory. So **Jesus** has gone AWOL, beyond the **geography** and history of the chosen people and their **God**.

There he seeks seclusion. But somehow the words get out and a Gentile woman, a lowly **Syro-Phoenician** woman seeks him out. She must cross a number of boundaries to approach **Jesus**. She goes beyond the **boundaries** of ethnicity, religion, nationality, and gender association. In debating with **Jesus**, she goes beyond the **boundaries** of social convention and piety.

There, out of bounds, beyond his history, **Jesus**' plan for lying low runs amuck. We've all been there! We just want a little peace and quiet but needy life comes storming in: children, a neighbour, a friend, a stranger in need. Or we just go to church for an hour or two for spiritual uplift and renewal, when the minister's message makes demands on us, committees call upon us, and the hymns are not so familiar to us. We can feel halfway between what seems like our lives and **God**'s grace. We can feel stuck just like Vicki and I felt in the Badlands. We can feel stuck just like **Jesus** felt stuck in Tyre. And argument breaks out as it often does. We know the argument that breaks out in our own mind.

Why is **Jesus** reluctant to heal this gentile?

Why is he rude to the woman?

Why is the church always asking more from me?

Why me? Why now?

The sticking point is; **Jesus** does not serve the vague **God** of everybody! He is tied to his tradition. He serves the **God of Israel**! He believes his power to heal is tied to the religious tradition, and the faith of fellow Jews. Remember in **Mark**'s gospel, when **Jesus** went to his hometown and on the Sabbath stood up and recited the scriptures, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. God has anointed me.*" The hometown crowd was offended and unbelieving. He could do no deeds of power there, and had to slip out of town to avoid physical harm.

In **Mark**'s gospel, **Jesus** has limits and so do we. In our story **Jesus** needs assistances. He is out of his comfort zone. He needs to find out if this woman is for real. If she has the kind of faith that can help bring the **God of Israel** into this situation. So he challenges her and she gives it right back to him. She is up for the challenge. She is strong and firm in her intentions. Together their faith draws the power of the **God of Israel** into this new place and into her child's tortured life. **God**'s grace has been enlarged and the opportunity for **God**'s healing power has been expanded.

In **Mark**'s gospel it is not all up to **Jesus**. Healing and acts of power involve others as well.

So, what is this saying to us?

Well, first off this is happening in ancient Syria involving a Syrian citizen. There is a connection today that can't be ignored or avoided.

Second, like Vicki and I discovered in the Badlands, we **just** need to engage **God**'s unexpected opportunities.

### ***Application for Today***

Connecting with God and with strangers, at the edges of our experiences and at the end of their rope, restores our soul and the lives of others. Amen.

Mark 7: 31-37

The Syrian refugee crisis can no longer be ignored. Pictures of dead children washed up on Turkish shores have gone viral around the world. What was far enough away to just wring our hands about has now entered our circle of concern. Syrian refugees, Christian or Muslim now have a claim on our collective humanity. What will we do? What would **Jesus** Do?

Well, as we saw earlier, **Jesus** far from home collaborates with an unlikely person and God's healing power is extended in unexpected places. The next thing **Jesus** does is continue to travel in the gentile areas of ancient Syria, arcing north to Sidon then south to the far side of the Sea of Galilee to the Decapolis, the ten towns of Roman occupation. This is the territory set up on the Roman model copying Roman style and architecture. It is the occupier's enclave, a far cry from what **Jesus** was used to. But because of the encounter of Syro-Phoenician woman, he now seeks out such places and can heal there as well.

Now **Jesus** seems to employ a little more theatrics in the Roman area. Maybe such dramatic use of spit, fingers in ears and loud commands were expected in that foreign cultural milieu. Whatever the case, **Jesus** goes into new, even hostile territory and extends **God's** healing, renewing grace to possible enemies.

We've known those times when new insights or new abilities have propelled us into larger fields and opportunities. Whether it was in business, education, family life or the ability to be more caring and compassionate more often. We know this expansion of heart, mind, ability or sense of responsibility. We have a sense of what **Jesus** was experiencing. We know like **Jesus**, this **God**-stuff gets us out of the box of our expected limitations.

So, what would **Jesus** do? Well, **Jesus** continued to push the envelopes, to expand the limits of **God's New Day** and make a difference in desperate people's lives.

So what should we do with the convergence of this ancient Syrian episode and today's Syrian tragedy?

I think we must become part of expanding and extending **God's New Day** to our Syrian brothers and sisters in such grave need and peril!

**Take time to witness.** Join Montreal City Mission at St. James Square at noon on Wednesday September 9<sup>th</sup>. They will be gathering signatures on a petition to the government and demonstrating our support for refugees caught up in this crisis.

**Send a letter.** Make your concern known to the Minister of Immigration. Sign and send a letter which will be made available through the office, or see Francis

Sault at the coffee hour for a copy, to the Minister of Immigration, Chris Alexander with a copy to your local member of parliament requesting that Canada increase its efforts to welcome refugees fleeing Syria.

There is also a **Ride for Refuge Bike-a-thon** on October 3<sup>rd</sup>. Consider sponsoring a Montreal City Mission team member or join the ride yourself and recruit some of your own sponsors.

Finally, I think we also need to redouble our investigation into sponsoring or assisting a Syrian Refugee family.

***Application for Today***

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