

“What Is the Story Here?”
Mark 7:24-37
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Many of you will remember that when the funeral was held for Elizabeth Edwards in December of 2010 at Edenton Street United Methodist Church, things were chaotic outside. The dysfunctional Westboro Baptist Church from Topeka came to protest and were given space at the corner of Edenton and Salisbury streets, in front of our church sign. The counter-protest group was given space across the street. And it just happened to be the day of Toy Joy. So, there was a line running into the parking lot with over a hundred volunteers inside.

Seeing the nasty signs the tiny number of Westboro Baptists were holding up, one of the counter-protesters held up a sign that read, “Buddha Hates Baptists.” One of our members walked across the street and asked him not to display this sign. When the man asked why, Steve pointed to the long line of people waiting for Christmas presents and noted that over a hundred First Baptist Raleigh members were waiting inside the building to make sure that over 1,000 children would receive toys at Christmas. The man put down his sign.

In the midst of the chaos, a reporter from the Raleigh News and Observer showed up to do a story on the Westboro protest. They were national news, after all, even though they were a tiny group mostly related to each other. So the reporter, Andrea Weigl, was sent to cover them, but someone steered her to our Toy Joy leaders and me, and she ended up writing a powerful story about the odd juxtaposition of Baptists – a tiny group of hatemongers and a huge gathering of people sharing love and kindness. She didn’t moralize, she didn’t have to, she just painted the picture and let people draw their own conclusions.

What Andrea Weigl did that day was what reporters always have to do, ask the question – what is the story here? There may seem to be one compelling story, but often there are many things going on at once. So, it takes a writer’s perspective, or an editor’s, to determine what the

most compelling story really is. And to state the obvious, not all writers or editors agree which is why every time there is a major event, the headlines vary dramatically.

I say all of this to frame a question for our familiar reading from Mark – what is the story here? Preachers have to ask this question too of biblical texts and contemporary events. But in regard to this text, before we say anything else, we have to ask what the most compelling story is. Is it the fact that Jesus crosses into Gentile territory and talks to a foreign woman? Is it the unsettling reality of how rude Jesus seems to be to this woman? Or is it the simple matter of him healing the woman's daughter in the end in addition to another Gentile? What is the story here?

Where we decide to focus often depends on our assumptions and biases, not just the story or even its context. So, today I thought I might follow Andrea Weigl's example and simply let the story speak for itself. There is no need to moralize. I'll just paint the picture and let you draw your own conclusions as to what matters most.

The place to begin is with how this story is received by its first hearers. 2,000 years later, with the benefit of church teaching, we assume that Jesus reaches out to all people and thus we don't even pause at the notice that he goes into the region of Tyre, Gentile territory. Nor do we make much of the fact that he talks to a woman, this woman in particular. But the first hearers of this story take note of these realities.

First, faith is for the children of Israel, no one else. Jesus may bring some new form of Judaism, but it is still Judaism at this point, and thus it is odd that he ventures onto foreign soil. Second, it is even odder that he speaks to this woman. It is taboo for him to do so for many reasons – she is a Syrophenician, a Gentile, a descendent of enemies; she is a woman unaccompanied by her husband or any male relative; and she comes to speak to him about her child who has an unclean spirit.

On all accounts Jesus has no business talking to her. He will ruin his reputation before his ministry really begins. But he not only talks to her, he ends up healing her daughter and later travels further into Gentile territory, where he heals a deaf man with a speech impediment. In last week's reading from Mark 7, Jesus stirs up trouble with the religious

authorities because he and his followers do not honor all the teachings of the elders. Today he takes things further by going to all the wrong places and talking to all the wrong people.

What might this part of the story say to us about our interactions with certain groups of people – immigrants and refugees, Muslims, LGBT people, people who are homeless or struggling with addiction, anyone who has been incarcerated? Who are the people good church folk might think we should avoid, lest we tarnish our reputation, and what might Jesus' example suggest about not only this perspective but the very idea that we are capable of judging the worthiness of others?

I have told some of you about a young man in another setting who came to Wednesday night supper and unsettled people. He had long hair and a scruffy beard and wore blue jeans in a church where men had crew cuts, no facial hair and certainly no blue jeans. After brief conversation with a couple friends, one man was about to ask the visitor to leave, but fortunately he first asked the deacon chair if he recognized the young man. "I sure do," he said, "He is my son." As it turned out, he had gone to college and changed his appearance...

On the flipside of this story, I think of a man Samuel Wells describes in an article included in a recent issue of *The Christian Century*. Wells took a group of students to an in-house recovery program and was met by a well-dressed man who gave the group a tour. Wells assumed he was a successful businessman volunteering as a way of giving back, but when Wells asked what got him involved with this work, the man said he was a resident. He started drinking in college and it got out of control years later. He lost his friends and family before he cleaned up his act. "You probably think I run this place or sit on the board," he said, "I don't. I live here."

Both stories remind us that we are not very good judges of character. Jesus doesn't even go there. He breaks taboos and reaches out to all, here talking with a Gentile woman. Perhaps this is the story.

But while Jesus talks to the woman, he isn't very kind to her, at least not at first. When she asks him to cast the demon out of her daughter, he says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take

the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She offers a savvy reply, reminding him that even dogs get the children's crumbs, an image that speaks to the hearts of all parents of young children who have dogs, and eventually, Jesus heals the woman's daughter. But really? Jesus says this? It is rude and insulting to dogs, not to mention contrary to his concern for all people which we take for granted. What is going on?

Several explanations have been suggested. Perhaps Jesus is testing her, checking to see if her faith is genuine, and perhaps quoting a bit of Jewish folk wisdom, not using his own words. Or perhaps Jesus is tired. The text says he doesn't want anyone to know where he is. He is human, after all, he needs a break, and this woman ruins his time away. Or perhaps Jesus doesn't yet understand that his mission extends to all people. In Matthew's version of this story, he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (15:24)."

Which of these explanations makes the most sense depends on our Christology, how we see Jesus, how we view the divine/human balance in his nature. If we favor divinity, we like the first option. If we favor humanity, the latter two might make sense. But the story itself doesn't give us any hints at an explanation, and the truth is no matter how we understand Jesus' motivations, this doesn't seem like him.

So, if this is the story here, what is the message for us? Especially in this time when there has been a resurgence of nationalism, racism and xenophobia, not to mention an increased sensitivity to the mistreatment of women, what do we take away from a story in which our Savior and Lord seems to be racist, xenophobic and sexist? I suppose we could take heart in the fact that even he struggles to treat everyone with dignity. He is human, like us, even if he is also divine. I don't know.

I'm not really comfortable going there. In fact, I'm not comfortable with this part of the story at all. Perhaps the best course is to acknowledge the rawness of this exchange and make sure we recognize it as an outlier, since in so many other stories Jesus embraces the stranger. This story does not provide a cover for Christians to embrace or endorse the kind of racism, sexism and hatred of the other many have. Scripture is clear as to where Christians stand in regard to such forces. We are against them.

Yet the story does not end with Jesus talking to the woman in an unsettling fashion. It ends with him healing the woman's daughter and then moving on to heal a deaf man with a speech impediment. It's not exactly – all's well that ends well – because the details along the way matter. But it also matters what Jesus does in the end. Especially given the boundaries he is not supposed to cross and perhaps his own limited sense of mission, what he does matters. That is a message that ought to stick with us, not the sensational negative headline, but the inspirational story about healing outsiders and their inclusion in God's realm.

For no matter what is going on with Jesus here, we often struggle to get things right. We harbor feelings and attitudes we know are unworthy of the gospel, but if we can persevere and do the right thing, we may find that those feelings no longer have any sway over us.

I think of a woman in another setting who was one of the most racist-talking people I knew, but from time to time she astonished me. Just before I baptized an older African-American woman, I asked her what led her to that moment of decision and made her feel welcome in our church. She told me about her grandson's faith decision at our Vacation Bible School, I knew about that, and then, she said one woman in her class had been very kind to her, the racist-talking woman.

Our attitudes and feelings matter, but what we do in the end matters even more. Maybe this is story here, I don't know. I'll keep my promise and leave that for you to decide.