

Mark 7:24-37
September 5, 2021

Faith Found

Part of the context of the gospel story is geographical. We are told that Jesus was Galilean. Galilee was the region in Northern Israel around the Sea of Galilee, which is drained by the Jordan River into the Dead Sea.

Jesus came from the Judean people living in what used to be the northern kingdom, the land of Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles. The population of Galilee and the surrounding area was not predominantly Jewish. Many were Romans, there to carry out the bureaucracy of the empire. Also present were people from the other ethnic groups of the region.

The word “Gentile” simply refers to people from other genealogies. In Christian parlance, the word is always used to refer to those who are not Jewish, but everybody has their “Gentiles.” The point is that wherever Jesus went, he bumped people who were Gentiles to him.

Today’s readings take us up the coast to the region of Tyre and Sidon, and also across to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee to the region known as the Decapolis, which means, “Ten Cities,” because there were ten new Roman cities there, where mostly Roman people lived. If they were religious, they were Pagans, which is a catch-all term for a set of religions in the Gentile world. They provide a background for

the encounters about which we have read this morning.

Let me borrow from another story found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in which Jesus encounters a Gentile. You will recognize the story of the centurion, whose servant was sick, and he asked for help and Jesus agreed to come, but he said, “no, there is no need to come, just say the word.” Jesus exclaimed about this faithful Gentile, “In all of Israel, I have not *found such faith*.” Even though in this case Jesus does not say it, the idea echoes in the stories. We hear his question from Luke’s gospel, “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

The first story is about a woman from the region around Tyre, in what is today Lebanon. Her daughter was sick with a demon and she was desperate. The encounter is one of the few in which Jesus betrays a cultural bias. When she asks for help he denies her on the grounds that to him she is a foreigner. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs,” he told her.

But her reply caused him to change his mind. “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” It is important for us to understand that in the social structure of their day, this Greek woman of Syro-Phoenician birth would have considered Jesus to be beneath her. Her concern about her daughter’s condition revealed her as human. It is not a stretch to say that like the centurion, he found in her, faith. So it

brought something out in Jesus too. Her daughter was healed.

The second story is like it. It happened over to the east in the region of The Decapolis. Jesus bumped into a man who was deaf and thus could not speak very well. He took him aside and touched his ears and tongue, at which point the man could hear, and speak freely. And then comes the usual commentary found in Mark's gospel, he told him not to tell. The man who couldn't talk was given speech and told not to use it.

The meaning in these two stories is revealed in the reaction of Jesus towards those he had been taught not to prefer. I hesitate to use the word "hate," but certainly Jesus had been affected by the cultural biases of his time and place. It is not the biases that should concern us. We believe in the Incarnation, that Jesus was genuinely human, and no human being could be left untouched by the biases of their time. Rather, it is his response when he encounters them that is meaningful. He gives an example to follow.

Maybe there was a time many thousands of years ago when people of different backgrounds could roam around without bumping into each other, but by the time of Jesus those days were past and they are certainly long since past now. As we experience in the present time, sometimes the result is negative, tense, even violent. But our stories for the day are not negative, but miraculous.

In the case of the woman, when she humbles herself, he saw that she was a mother concerned for the well-being of her child, which is as universal a part of the human condition as there is, he helped her. With the deaf man we don't see the hesitancy, but clearly in seeing the man's suffering and knowing the implications for his family, Jesus was willing to help.

What an example! We are not only asked to be compassionate to those who are in a different place on the social spectrum, or people of a different culture, or even just people who are sick, but it *extends* . . . until it reaches across to any person we might have the occasion to bump into in this life.

It you are like me, then your faith began with a concern for your own spiritual health; maybe there was guilt and a need for pardon, or a concern about mortal vulnerability, or the fear that life has no meaning, but wherever faith begins, sooner or later we bump into the ones we have been taught not to prefer, and we are compelled to follow the example of Jesus.

It turns out the geography is irrelevant after all. We too have our north and south, and the coastal regions on the Atlantic or the Gulf which are susceptible to storms, or the river regions, Mississippi and Ohio, or the Great Lakes, where these encounters still occur, and faith is found in the most surprising of places. In these stories we catch a glimpse of a better world, and better way to live; we dream of our own transformation, and of the world's, in the name of Jesus. That is our faith, may it be found in us.

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