



DIVERSITY SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 11, 2010

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Lection - Mark 7:24-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 24) From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, (v. 25) but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. (v. 26) Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. (v. 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.” (v. 28) But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” (v. 29) Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” (v. 30) So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

To truly value diversity is to constantly learn about those around you. It is to learn that

*diversity means co-dependency, not by choice
but by God-ordained requirement.*

Ben Sanders, III

On this Sunday we reflect on the vision of all God's people, **people of every faith and ethnicity**, gathered before the heavenly throne in the present vision of the future Reign of God. Our commitment is to drag that future vision into present worship reality.

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Several years ago, I had the wonderful opportunity to work on a book entitled Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship.¹ My chapter in that book focused on a reading of Mark that celebrated an intentionally and radically inclusive faith. The words I wrote then remain meaningful for me now. "In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is a preacher of multicultural worship. He envisioned a future that was radically different from the one espoused by the temple leadership of his present Jerusalem. The temple presided over a world where non-Jewish ethnicities were condemned by the theological motifs of holiness and purity, and demonized by the myopic fever of messianic nationalism. Mark's Jesus offered a counter kingdom proposal; he foresaw a time when every people of every nation would call God's temple their house of prayer. He saw the apocalypse of worship, the revelation of its end time reality and God's reality. And so Mark wrote to rally his people. He wanted them to bring into the present what Jesus had foreseen of the end." Mark 7:24-30 envisions this future by foreshadowing a world where Jews and Gentiles share together the bread of God's healing, life-giving, and life-sustaining power. The ethnic boundary that separated Jew from Gentile through codes of ritual and purity were broken through by a Jesus ministry that saw all people capable of being together in communal meal and communal worship no matter their human or physical circumstance.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Jesus heads up to Tyre in an effort to secure some rest (7:24). That's when a Greek (meaning gentile) woman, a Syrophenician by birth (meaning gentile), asks Jesus to save her daughter from an unclean spirit. When Jesus responds to the Syrophenician woman's request, he says that the children must first be satisfied (7:27). The language of satisfaction (*chortazō*) is suggestive; Mark only uses this verb here and in the parallel stories where first a Jewish crowd of five thousand (6:42) and then a gentile crowd of four thousand (8:4, 8) are fed bread in the desert. Interestingly enough, at 7:27 Jesus describes his healing power, metaphorically, as the children's "bread." It is as though "bread" is symbolic of the breaking down of boundaries that separate Jew and gentile; Jesus certainly uses the bread that way in his ministry.

First though, Jesus sets up what appears to be an exclusivistic boundary confirming statement. "Let the children first be satisfied," he clarifies, because "it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Jesus intends to say that it is not right to take the eschatological power of God's dawning reign and give it to unclean, defiled gentiles. But, these are the very gentiles Jesus has included at 7:1-23 when he declares that all foods are clean and thus implies that Gentiles can be in table fellowship and thus community with Jews! His calling Gentiles dogs seems to contradict his earlier openness and conform to the exclusionary perspective shaped by the traditions of the elders, the very traditions he has spent so much religious capital debunking.

Why is Jesus now apparently upholding the very intolerance he has just ravaged? There are two primary explanations. One, Jesus was reflecting his own traditional understanding that his historical ministry was directed primarily toward Israel. In that case, his ministry objectives would have been in sync with the traditional sense of separation between Jew and Gentile. Although the hostile epithet of dogs is clearly harsh, it would have matched the manner in which Jews of the period thought of the uncleanness of their Gentile neighbors. Indeed, it is noteworthy that, in the woman's reply, she accepts the moniker before she initiates her rebuttal. Two, Jesus was using this moment as a teaching opportunity for disciples who still found it difficult to move with him all the way in his boundary-breaking efforts. Believing that he had found someone who would respond in the proper way, he allowed himself to be shamed so that he could show the shame of an attitude that considered Gentiles prohibitively unclean. In other words, Jesus expected her to rise to the occasion; and she did.

Whatever the case may be, **it is the woman's response that Jesus, and, so therefore should we, finds remarkable.** She agrees with the recognized status of gentiles in the eyes of Judaism of the time. And yet, appealing to the same universal understanding of God that Jesus himself teaches, she declares that, although a dog may be unclean and therefore lower than even a child in the household, it still exists within the household. It is still a part of God's communal creation. She has taken Jesus' metaphor and reoriented it. Jews, considering dogs unclean, did not usually entertain them inside the house. Gentiles, however, would domesticate the animals and bring them in. In her Gentile worldview, it was, therefore, possible to be a dog and yet still be within the larger physical confines of family space. As such, a dog would have access to the leftover bread that falls from the children's table. Amazingly enough, in the two parallel feeding stories of Jews first and then Gentiles, there was an abundance of leftover bread. The Syrophenician woman wonders why this "bread" cannot be used to feed her and her people's hunger (7:28).

When Jesus agrees (7:29-30), the implicit boundary-breaking movement of Mark's Gospel takes explicit form. Jesus grants her request because of the power of her argument. It is an argument that not only recognizes the difference between Jew and Gentile, but then breaches that separation by suggesting that Gentiles, too, should receive the power of God's healing reign.

Challenge

Why is this such an important story in Mark's Gospel? Mark wants us to holler for transformation the way that woman hollered for the transformation of her daughter's life situation, even when all the signals say, you ought to shut up, give up and go home. If that woman could stand up to Jesus, I think Jesus was telling us, we ought to be able to stand up to anybody else or anything else on this planet. "You want change? You want to build on earth the kind of diversity we envision in heaven" he seems to be telling the woman, "then you're gonna have to fight for it. You're gonna have to be relentless. You're gonna have to raise your voice!"

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: A house in Tyre; a little girl lying on a bed with an unclean spirit; a woman of Syrophenician origin bowing down at the feet of Jesus; the face of Jesus as the woman is relentless in fighting for her daughter; dogs eating crumbs under a table; a little girl delivered of an unclean spirit; the face of the Syrophenician woman as she watched her daughter struggle with demon possession; the face of the Syrophenician mother upon seeing that her daughter has been delivered from demons;

Sounds: The sounds made by a child possessed of an unclean spirit; the discussion between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman; people in the house in Tyre murmuring about the woman's relentlessness as she talked to Jesus; the scream of joy by the mother upon finding the demon gone from her daughter; and

Colors: The color of the clothing worn by Jesus; the color of the clothing worn by the Syrophenician woman; the color of the furniture in the house in Tyre; and the color of the items in the room where the little girl laid.

III. References for Preaching Mark and for Multicultural Approaches to Texts

See Blount, Brian K. and Gary W. Charles. Preaching Mark in Two Voices. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003 and Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship.

Note

1. Blount, Brian K. and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale. Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.