

Message
September 5-6, 2009
Isaiah 35:4-7; Mark 7:24-37
Discomfort With Jesus
Hillary T. West

This weekend there's much to celebrate. Hopefully, everyone will have some Sabbath time Monday, to take a rest from our labors on this national holiday of Labor Day. It's a start up time as well. NFL football begins Thursday night (Tennessee Titans and the Pittsburgh Steelers). And, of course, for many, school begins on Tuesday. Good times of celebration, new beginnings. But, as often is the case with celebrations, we are conflicted, discomforted. Friday we'll remember, after 8 years, the tragedy and horror of 9/11. This week we're also reminded of the devastation of Katrina after four years of recovery work. And, for many, while we celebrate Sabbath rest this labor day, we long for meaningful employment. Life is this way. Where there is joy, there is suffering; and it makes us uncomfortable. When things are good, we just want them to be good, not in between.

Well, in today's story we're struck with discomfort because of a pushy woman, a disabled man and Jesus who makes us uncomfortable in his responses to pleas for healing and wholeness. Here are some things Jesus is about today that might make us uncomfortable. He's on a mission and he's going to places where he may well not be so welcome. He's confrontational with a needy woman. And, he's performing some healing miracles that don't quite match up. But, somehow in all this discomfort, everything he does is good. So, let's travel with Jesus...

Jesus is on a mission, to spread the kingdom. It means boundary crossing. He's traveling the 100 or so miles from Gennesaret on the Sea of Galilee to the territory of Tyre on the Mediterranean Sea. Tyre is actually a small island just off the southern coast of Lebanon. It's connected to the mainland by a causeway built by Alexander the Great (in late 4th century B.C.). Just 20 miles north of Tyre is Sidon, a prosperous center of commerce and learning. This is not friendly territory for Jesus. It's fair to say that these folks hate the Jews. He's traveling in Gentile territory. Jesus is up against some serious idol worship. The Phoenicians worship the gods of nature and fertility, Baal, Astarte and Adonis. He's hoping to go unnoticed. Maybe he needs a rest from a very demanding ministry. He tucks himself away in the safety of a home of fellow believers. But, the word of the Lord cannot be contained. A woman, she's heard of Jesus, immediately, appears and falls at the feet of Jesus, begging to have her daughter made well.

How is it that she knows Jesus? Even his own disciples struggle to understand his power. We're reminded that at the start of Jesus' ministry, and the crowds are quickly gathering. Some in the crowd were from Tyre and Sidon. Maybe this pushy, determined woman learned from these first followers. Maybe, just maybe, she's coming to believe that Jesus' healing power far outweighs any pagan god. She's not just any woman. Her Greek, Syro Phoenician status tells us that she's probably a "lady" of some social significance. She well may be used to getting her way. Regardless, of her status, this is a mom, with a child stricken with such evil, she's unable to function. Boldly, the mom

disrupts Jesus' intended peace. She's a boundary crasher, this woman. As she approaches Jesus she's in violation of ancient code. The woman is alone, unaccompanied, and addressing a man, especially a Jewish man, without being invited. That doesn't seem to alter her position. She's heard about Jesus and his healing power and strength and she's frantic to have her daughter made well. Or maybe she's just exhausted all possibilities for her daughter's recovery and falling at the feet of Jesus is her last ditch effort. We don't know. But, I imagine that's how it is sometimes. Things are not well, in fact, life is spinning out of control, unmanageable; and, we're so desperate we'll do whatever we have to do. So, thankfully, we just surrender, falling at the feet of Jesus begging for mercy. He comes, he saves us, receiving us into his healing arms, with the promise of hope. This woman has an attitude. She doggedly pursues Jesus begging him to rid her daughter of the demon. In the Greek, the word "beg" implies that she's asking for an advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be right alongside of her daughter. Jesus, she begs, saddle right up alongside of my most precious little girl, drive away the evil that possesses her, and be forever present as her loving, protective friend.

The healing miracle is not without some tension. In Matthew's gospel Jesus grants healing because of her faith, as he proclaims, "...great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish." Not so in Mark's gospel. There's no proclamation of the woman's faith. But, it seems to me that faith is living with uncertainty, with discomfort, and the willingness to move around in the discomfort, asking, begging, waiting, watching, as the healing and wholeness break through. This pushy woman, she doesn't get the response from Jesus that she's looking for. And, if she knows anything about Jesus, and presumably she does because she's at his feet begging for miracles, she's not expecting such harsh words. "The children should be fed first, he says, "because its not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the little dogs." In other words, the chosen ones, the Jews, they're the children of Israel, and they get first crack at the healing power of God. After all, you're a foreigner, a Gentile. Why would we nurture and care for you when you're not even one of us? Wait your turn; and if there's enough, we'll toss it to you, the dogs.

Dogs live on the streets, are considered unclean and treated with little respect. Jesus, grants her some level of dignity and elevates her to the status of, "little dog". Little dogs live indoors as house pets, loved and cared for. It's a wonder the woman doesn't turn away at his indignation. Instead, she comes right back at him. Yes sir, she claims, even little dogs get the scraps. The boundaries for God's grace and mercy are not that narrow. In you, Lord Jesus, there's always enough, even for the least of us. Even the dogs under the table are fed with your healing power. Jesus, you can care for your followers, yes you can. But, you're able to care for my daughter as well. I'm not letting go here. You're all I've got left.

Compassion holds no boundaries for Jesus. Stepping outside the law, Jesus says, Ok, you're right. Go home, your daughter is free from her torment. Returning home, the pushy mom finds her daughter sitting up in bed, relaxed and free of all her anguish. Jesus' mission is never completed. It's round about, and turned upside down. Off he goes again, north around Sidon and then south and around across to Decapolis, near the Sea of Galilee; but again, in Gentile territory. He's relentless in bringing all into the

kingdom. Once again, some people know about Jesus. Maybe they learned earlier from the demoniac of how Jesus freed him. They bring him a man completely unable to hear, and speaking only with a stammer, debilitated, unable to cope in society. We're reminded of the friends who carry the paralyzed man on the stretcher and lower him through the roof to receive Jesus' healing power. Thank God for devoted friends, who trust and believe, reaching out to help in times of trial.

Here we encounter the Jesus we all desire. The Jesus who, on that mountain side took pity on the 5,000 who were like sheep without a shepherd. The Jesus who, encourages the president of the synagogue saying, "do not be afraid, only have faith" and takes the hand of his dead daughter, restoring her to life. The Jesus who, commands peace and calm over raging waters bringing his disciples to safety.

Sensitive to the man's condition, aware that he lives in shame, having lost his integrity, that the community regards him as unholy. Jesus rescues him from further embarrassment and takes him aside. Healing will put this sick man's life back in order. But, there is discomfort. Getting right in his face, touching with such intimacy, Jesus sticks his fingers in his ears. Then, taking his own spit from his mouth, touches his tongue. In ancient times, Gentile magicians applied spit as a form of healing; believed to have medicinal purposes. In this culture, Jesus once again crosses boundaries, and does whatever he must do to restore and heal. So, he may well be within the comfort zone of healing. But, his closeness, this intimacy, his tender touch, his sigh, actually, the groan he sends up before calling out the Aramaic "Ephphatha," be opened; it's uncomfortable. Ears unstopped, his tongue released, the man sings for joy.

What kind of healing miracle is this? The irony Mark's writer plays. The Syro Phoenician woman is so well skilled at putting her words together, she's able to hold Jesus accountable. And yet, the man with the speech impediment is hardly able to form a sentence. Both, come before Jesus. Both find healing; but not without discomfort; and this Jesus, how he moves around in our discomfort, with his healing strength. So, now, here we are, coming before Jesus with all that plagues us and breaks us down; with whatever stops our listening and stunts our words. We come before him and ask and ask, and pester and plead and we squirm searching anxiously for healing. Sometimes, we don't get the kind of healing we want. He beholds us, taking us aside, lifting up his arms, he cradles our face. He sees our anguish and hears our suffering. And, he says, "I'm opening your ears so you can hear, let go, trust in me, ...surrender to me, let me love you with the boundless love I have for you. My healing power is enough." He peers into our face and he sees the holy. We are his, bound in love and mercy.

That's boundary crossing, when Jesus gets in our face, and in our space and presses us to be his. But, not for Jesus. He will travel to the ends of the earth to be ours. He will demand the very best of us; maybe even words we don't want to hear; and he will, forever until all time, bring healing power and strength. This is how it is with Jesus, who gives his whole being, every bit, for us, so that we can go, as his very own; for everything he does is good. Let's get uncomfortable with Jesus.

