

September 8, 2024 Prpr 18 Dogs at the Table

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It sounds like Jesus was having a bad day in our Gospel lesson this morning. We heard and read he was in an unfamiliar place, inside someone else's house, trying to get away from it all for a while. Perhaps we can all relate to that. It is after all, important to our own health and wellbeing to recognize when we need a rest.

Perhaps we can also relate to settling in for that rest, about to relax, only to have the phone ring. Or the doorbell. And whoever called or is at the door cannot be ignored. So much for a bit of relaxation.

The author of Mark's Gospel does not tell us why Jesus needed to get away for a while, only that he tried. What we got from Mark instead is a conversation between Jesus and a woman that can be uncomfortable to read and hear. It might be a relief to know that conversation has caused discomfort for many years; so much so that many scholars, commentators, preachers and even a few historians have attempted to soften it for us, make it a bit more comfortable. After all, no one wants to think of Jesus a jerk.

But perhaps there is a reason the author of Mark included this uncomfortable conversation. Perhaps there is something in the discomfort that reveals God is present and at work. I know it is not easy to look at something that rubs us the wrong way, and I do not want to trigger anything in any of us. So, let's take this a bit at a time.

First of all, this conversation reminds us Jesus was not an easy-going guy that always said yes to whatever was asked. Jesus did not come to fix or solve our problems. He came for a deeper purpose; one we still have a hard time understanding. Jesus came to repair something that had been severed. He came to restore our relationship with God, and in so doing change our relationship with all people, with the earth, and the creatures of the earth.

The author of Mark's Gospel makes it clear the woman who barged into the house where Jesus was trying to rest was a foreigner, a person of a different race and culture. There happened to be a history between Jesus' culture and that of the woman's that most of us probably aren't familiar with. The short version is they didn't get along for many reasons. One is they had different ways of managing their households. An example is for people of Jesus' culture and time, dogs were not considered family pets. They were unclean, dangerous, semi wild animals that lived outside their communities. For the woman's culture, it was the opposite. Dogs were part of the family, they were allowed in houses, taken care of, and loved. And yes, they ate the food that fell from the tables where families ate. Maybe some folks intentionally fed them scraps.

For those of us who have dogs or grand dogs and love them, please don't judge Jesus or his culture as bad; it was just the way it was for that people in that time. It is absolutely okay to love our dogs, and cats for that matter. In fact, this may be one of the things Jesus learned that day.

Jesus' response to the woman sounds and feels racist, and is one of the things that can be really difficult for us to hear. It also sounds sexist, and that is hard to hear too. Which is why it is important to pay attention to the rest of the conversation. We don't know how the woman felt, we don't know if she sighed, rolled her eyes, or was offended. We just know what she said in response to Jesus' words. Even the dogs eat what falls from the table.

This reminds me of our dog Jack, a big black mixed breed who came with Michael when we got married. My parents absolutely adored Jack, who died 4 years ago this month. We still miss him. One of my favorite memories of Jack is how my parents spoiled him. When we lived in Ohio, it took us a good 11-12 hours to drive to Waupaca (that's where my parents live), and of course my mom always had a

good dinner waiting for us when we got there. Michael and I were exhausted from driving all day so we wouldn't notice that we couldn't see where Jack was until we were well into the meal. Then one of us would ask my parent's, "Where's Jack?" My parents would look at us and say very calmly, "he's right here". That's when, as if on cue, Jack would pop up, he was big enough to look over the table, so we could see his head. He was sitting between my parents at the table, and I noticed I could only see one of each of my parents' hands because they were feeding him under the table. He was in heaven, and so were my parents. And, of course, so were Michael and me. We were all getting love in the form of a good meal after a long day of traveling and there was more than enough – enough food and love and room at the table for us all.

This is perhaps the message Jesus received from the woman who had a different relationship with dogs than Jesus did. One that exemplified the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus spoke of in his parables, where there is room for everyone at the table. Perhaps Jesus even had an insight that room wasn't just for people, but for all creation. For in restoring people to relationship with God, Jesus restored the whole world, including all creatures, even ones we might not have thought about having a relationship with.

Which could be why Jesus praised the woman for what she said. Perhaps *she* gave *him* the gift that day; the day her daughter was freed from torment and restored to wholeness and wellness, to her family and her community.

If you read the Old Testament, especially the books of Genesis and Jonah, you might recognize there are times when God changed God's mind. Even when God had a plan, like destroying all people of Ninevah in the story of Jonah, God changed God's mind when the people of Ninevah listened to Jonah, acknowledged how they had deviated from following God, showed their grief, and promised to change. God decided not to wipe them out, sparing the people and their animals.

Perhaps Jesus remembered this story and remembered one of God's characteristics is to be moved when people speak out or show God's love in action that might not have been part of God's original plan, but impresses God and inspires God to change and he changed. Biblical scholars tell us part of Jesus' plan was to first restore the people of Isreal to God, then the rest of the world. But when Jesus heard the what the woman said, he remembered if God can change God's mind, so could he. Perhaps that is one reason God does not attempt to control us, so that we can bring out the best in each other, and maybe that is the relationship God deeply longs for, the relationship Jesus came to restore.

Jesus also healed a man in today's Gospel, liberating him from the inability to speak. Again, Jesus' acts of healing were not about fixing, they were signs like those mentioned in the first reading we heard from the prophet Isaiah that the Messiah is present, that God was at work, and whenever God is at work all of creation celebrates and what was baren or judged dangerous becomes the stuff of life.

During this season of creation, we are being invited to listen, just like Jesus, to cultures that differ from ours, and consider what they might teach us about our relationship with God, each other, with the creatures of the earth, and the earth itself. It might not all be wise or helpful, but some of it might help us remember our connection to each other, to all the creatures of the earth, and the earth, and that we can change. This connection is one of God's gifts of creation. It is not always easy or comfortable to recognize when we aren't the best we can be, especially when we have gotten too comfortable with judgmentalism, or the way things have always been, or at least how we think they have always been, but today's Gospel reminds us when we are brave enough to look at what might be uncomfortable, we might just find God and God's kingdom right here with us, inviting change and welcoming us to the table where there is more room than we imagined.