

Proper 18 B Sermon  
Mark 7:24-30  
September 5, 2021

*Transformational Proximity*  
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*Jesus 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, <sup>25</sup>but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup>Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup>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.” <sup>28</sup>But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” <sup>29</sup>Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” <sup>30</sup>So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

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I feel that I need to be honest with you about something. I’m not proud of it, but the simple truth is: I am not an athlete. In fact, one might go so far as to say that I am the antithesis of an athlete – as far from an athlete as you can get. In school, I was the guy on the volleyball court that didn’t see the ball coming and it dropped at my feet. I was the tee ball player who didn’t hit a single ball during game play the whole season and the one good hit I did get in practice, landed in my unsuspecting coach’s mouth – the coach was my dad. At summer camp, I caught a lovely ground ball – in my eye and the nurse made me hold bologna on my face for a day, because they didn’t have steak. I’m freaked out by flying objects,

not fast enough to be a runner, and don't have the hand-eye coordination in takes to play badminton – or even horseshoes for that matter. I am not an athlete and, to be completely honest, I couldn't have cared less about sports – that is, until a few years ago when I started dating an athlete.

Almost over night, I *needed* to care, or at least act like I did. I started going to the batting cages, and out for bowling nights and football games. The first softball game I attended, I even caught a ball – in the back of the head, in the bleachers! Gradually, though, I did actually start to care, root for my team, even feel invested in the outcome of the games. It took another person that I cared about and for whom sports were important, for me to see and experience sports differently. I changed – I still can't hit the broadside of a barn or catch a beach ball – but, I still changed...on the inside!

Believe it or not, our text from Mark's Gospel tells the story of a Jesus who also changed. Sometimes we think of Jesus as perfect from birth, unwaveringly on course with heaven's plan, always kind – full of love and mercy. That, however, is not the Jesus we see in the first verses of our reading.

The text begins with Jesus attempting to escape the crowds for some much-needed R&R. Instead, he was found by a non-Jewish woman who begged him to heal her daughter. Jesus' response is perhaps one of the most surprising, if not offensive things recorded in the Gospels. "Let the children be fed first," he said. "For it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus made no attempt to hide the fact that, at this point, his mission was to the children – the chosen people of Israel. To him, this gentile woman and her daughter with their pagan beliefs were little more than dogs unworthy of what he had to offer. Her response was eloquent and resolved: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." The woman didn't back down. She was

undeterred. Her love for her daughter and her hope that this man might still be willing to come to their aid won out, she pressed him, challenged his assumptions, and Jesus healed her daughter.

What a bizarre and unsettling story. This is not the Jesus of extravagant welcome, boundless love, limitless mercy, and selfless sacrifice that we know and love. One commentator suggests that maybe, just maybe Jesus hadn't fully lived into his messianic consciousness. Actually, that's just a fancy way of saying that maybe even Jesus didn't quite realize just how expansive God's kingdom was yet. Maybe this desperate woman pushed him, stretched his vision of God's grace, made clear to him in an unexpected and initially unwelcome way that there is room in heaven's realm for all, for Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, insider and outsider, even dogs like her and her daughter.<sup>1</sup>

I tend to think this commentator is right. Jesus' ministry was never the same after. He immediately went on, in Mark's Gospel, to heal a deaf/mute Gentile man, and then to feed a multitude of hungry Gentiles with seven loaves and a few small fish. Jesus' encounter with this woman brought him into transformational proximity with the needs of another – an outsider, a woman, a Gentile – and it changed the scope of his ministry forever.

I don't know about you, but *this* is a Jesus I can relate to – a Jesus that feels just a little more human; a Jesus with prejudice and a little bit of nastiness; but still a Jesus that was ultimately willing to admit when he was wrong; a Jesus that could change in light of a new perspective shown him by the life experiences of another. This Syrophonecian woman brought out the best in Jesus – brought out the divine in Jesus. That's what happens in real,

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose. "Commentary on Mark 7:24-37," Workingpreacher.org.

transformational relationships. And human beings are made for relationships.

Writing on the nature of human relationships, author and organizational systems guru, Margaret Wheatley, has this to say:

The scientific search for the basic building blocks of life has revealed a startling fact: there are none. The deeper that physicists peer into the nature of reality, the only thing they find is relationships. Even sub-atomic particles do not exist alone. One physicist described neutrons, electrons, etc. as “a set of relationships that reach outward to other things.” Although physicists still name them as separate, these particles aren’t ever visible until they’re in relationship with other particles. Everything in the Universe is composed of these “bundles of potentiality” that only manifest their potential in relationship.<sup>2</sup>

The truth is, others bring out the best in us, challenge our preconceived ideas and limited experiences, bring out our potential, and make us better, more complete individuals. The truth is, people are made for relationships – and so are communities of faith.

Our text from Mark’s Gospel invites us to be open to the unexpected blessing and insight a stranger might bring to us. This story invites us – no urges us – not to keep others at arms length, to get close enough to others that we can experience the Holy in them and to become more than we were, to be changed. We may even find that, as in Jesus’ case, the scope of our own lives and our own church’s mission will be broadened, energized, and renewed when we come into transformational proximity with others – with those outside our congregation, with individuals, households, schools, organizations, and issues beyond our walls – as we discern who

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<sup>2</sup>Margaret Wheatley. “Relationships: The Basic Building Blocks of Life,” Margaretwheatley.com, 2006, <https://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/relationships.html>.

needs us, what they need from us, and how to leverage our resources to be their advocates, their community, their friends.

The invitation for us today is this: not to keep people at arms length, but to get close enough that our lives and our mission and their lives are all enriched, changed, and transformed. In the words of author, David W. Earle, let us “Consider letting go of the barriers between [ourselves] and others, let go of the definition our culture has inflicted upon us and allow the best part of ourselves to connect with the wondrous parts of others. Allow yourself to connect in a deeper and more profound way.” May it be so. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

*O God, thank you for creating each of us with the need and the capacity to work and to love. Thank you for the joy of self-abandonment in doing the work to which we are truly called and in sharing the love for which we are expressly fashioned. Grant us the courage and the persistence, we pray, to do the tasks you have equipped us to do, even when the world accords us little status or reward for such work. Help us to be wise and gentle with each other in the giving and receiving of care lest we become overly preoccupied with merely pleasing others or with only satisfying our own desires. By your grace, may we discover and rediscover the places where the world's deep longings and our own deep gladness meet.*

*There are times, O God, when we fear we are not made for happiness—times when it seems that everyone except us has it altogether; times when the notion of meaningful work seems like a luxury we can't afford; times when we are steeped in loneliness and grief; times when pain gnaws at our bones. There are days that stretch into weeks and months—sometimes even years—when we despair of ever knowing deep gladness. Hold us close in those times, O God. Come to us in the guise of a friend or stranger who offers us understanding and the assurance that we are seen and known and cared for. Help us, also to recognize ones to whom we may offer such understanding and assurance. So may our longings meet the full, deep gladness of Jesus<sup>3</sup>, who taught us to pray:*

**Our Father/Mother/Creator who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And**

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<sup>3</sup> Rickeman, Virginia. *The Well Is Deep*. Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999, pg. 38.

**lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**