

Does Charity Begin at Home?

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Mark 7:24-30

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, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

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."

28 But she answered him,  
"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

## DOES CHARITY BEGIN AT HOME?

Does charity begin at home? Many seem to think so. Some even think that it comes from the Bible. I wish I had a dollar for every time some parishioner has told me, "Well, pastor like the good book says, 'Charity begins at home.'"

I usually reply, "Show me where the Bible says that."

They're not able to do it, but they do learn to use a Bible concordance so I count it as a win, win.

Actually, there is a place in the Bible that comes close to this proverb, and it comes from the lips of Jesus! In today's lesson Jesus decides to cross over into Gentile country to get some rest and relaxation. Think of it as making a trip to some resort in Mexico.

But even in Gentile country Jesus can't get any rest.

A Syrophenician woman has a daughter who is demon possessed, and she hears about Jesus.

Out of desperation she comes to Jesus, throws herself at his feet, and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

And that's when Jesus uses the proverb.

He says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Wow. That makes "charity begins at home" seem rather benign.

This really is the Jesus we've never known.

It seems very harsh. He seems to be calling this woman a dog.

As you might imagine the commentators struggle to interpret this passage.

Some say that Jesus was testing the woman, to see if her faith were true.

In Matthew's gospel we find another version of this story, and when the woman persists in asking for healing, she is praised by Jesus as a person of great faith.

So, that would lead us to believe that this encounter could have been a test of faith.

But, more recent commentators have suggested something else, that Jesus made a mistake. Since Jesus was human, he reflected the prejudices of his time, and he had to learn a new way.

Through this woman's persistence and her clever comment about even the dogs getting the scraps that are thrown under the table, Jesus' eyes are opened to a greater message.

God's kingdom will come not just to the Jews but also to the Gentiles.

Of course, when you think about it, if Jesus was fully human, why wouldn't he learn in the normal way? All of us have to learn to overcome the prejudices that are a part of our society. It's part of what it means to be human.

But, I think this is a rabbit trail.

All this speculation about "what Jesus know and when did he know it" misses the whole point of the story. This story is a part of a much larger section of Mark that reveals the true nature of the gospel.

The gospel is not what people think it is.

And that means that Jesus must wait until the proper time to reveal it.

## THE OPEN SECRET

Scholars refer to this as the Messianic Secret.

In the first half of Mark's gospel when Jesus heals people they are often told,

"Don't tell anyone what I've done." When the disciples see Jesus in all his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus tells them, "Don't tell anyone what you've seen."

But, of course it never works that way.

If you tell someone, "I have something to tell you in confidence" sometimes they seem to interpret that to mean that they should spread the word far and wide! Wait 15 minutes, and you'll see it on Facebook.

The same thing happened with Jesus.

He told them to be quiet.

But, nobody listened.

And so Jesus became widely know as a worker of miracles.

## THE WRONG CONCLUSION

The reason Jesus wanted to keep his miracles a secret is that the people invariably drew the wrong conclusion. Acts of power and demonstrations of glory might be exciting.

But, what do they mean?

For Jesus this was the more important point.  
And quite often that point was lost on the disciples and the crowds.

They wanted to be fed and healed.  
They wanted a change in their government.

But, they had no spiritual hunger.  
They had no vision of a kingdom that would stretch beyond their own  
Promised Land.

I must say that we have a lot in common with those who first misunder-  
stood Jesus.

Religion is often big business in this country.  
The bookstores are filled with “sanctified” self-help books. “Have your best  
life now.”

For a long time now religion has been used by politicians as a way of bol-  
stering their arguments on various issues. They say in effect,

“If you don’t agree with me you’re not only un-American, you’re un-Chris-  
tian.”

But, the miracles of Jesus are about more than just the healing of one per-  
son. The glory of the Lord is greater than any earthly kingdom, including  
our own Promised Land.

And that’s the larger message of our lesson for today.  
The Kingdom of God even includes Gentiles, those who live on the wrong  
side of the tracks, those who live on the other side of the border.

God is not in the business of building greater walls.  
God is in the business of taking walls down.

## FEEDING OF THE 5,000

Let’s pull back the lens of our focus and look at the bigger picture in Mark’s  
gospel.

In the sixth Chapter of Mark we read about the feeding of the 5,000.

Most of you know the story.

With only five loaves and two fish Jesus miraculously feeds everyone and even has twelve baskets full of food left over.

What did that miracle mean?

It was a sign of God's coming kingdom.

Just as God fed his people in the wilderness, God was feeding his people again.

But, now the agent of that salvation was Jesus.

Jesus was the bread of life.

On the night before his death, he makes that perfectly clear. He takes the loaf and says,

"This is my body which is broken for you."

This was no mere picnic in the countryside.

It was a sign that God was among his chosen people and was working in a new way.

## FAITH AMONG THE GENTILES

But, no one understood the message, and that included those who were closest to Jesus. The Bible tells us that the disciples "had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened."

In the next story in the seventh chapter of Mark, our lesson last week and the story that precedes our lessons for today, we learn that the disciples were not the only ones who had hard hearts. The religious leaders had hard hearts as well.

Jesus criticizes the Pharisees roundly for their hypocrisy.

These religious leaders are fastidious about observing their religious traditions.

They ritualistically wash their hands and make sure that everything they eat is kosher.

But, though they are clean on the outside they are unclean on the inside.

No one understands.

Jesus does not find faith in the Promised Land.

So he crosses the border into Gentile territory.

And ironically among the Gentiles Jesus finds what he could not find among his own people in the Promised Land. He finds faith.

A desperate woman asks for healing, just a scrap from the table of the Master. She has faith, and she finds salvation.

Her daughter is healed.

The scraps that fall from the table of the heavenly banquet are more than just a few crumbs. They are enough to feed the whole world.

The grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ spills over the borders of the Promised Land into pagan country. And a desperate woman becomes a woman of faith.

Jesus tells her that she can go home.

Her prayer is answered.

Her child is healed.

## FAITH AND DESPERATION

When you travel with Jesus it is hard to know what will happen next. The religious leaders are hypocrites and the disciples are clueless.

But, we find faith in the hope of a pagan mother who desperately desires her daughter to be healed.

Faith is more than knowledge.

Faith is being desperate enough to reach out and perceptive enough to reach toward Jesus.

Some of you know what that's like.

You came to Jesus out of desperation because you needed a miracle in the worst sort of way.

And you got it.

That's what happened with this woman.  
She didn't have the knowledge of the disciples or the religious leaders.  
All she knew was that she needed help.  
And she got it.

What about you?  
What do you want from Jesus?

What demon has invaded your life or the lives of the ones you love? What do you desire so deeply and desperately that you are willing to throw yourself at the feet of Jesus and ask for it?

Our lesson for today suggests that desperate people are close to the heart of Jesus.

Quite often faith begins in a moment of desperation in a place far from the Promised Land.

## SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY

After our lesson for today, the journey into Gentile country continues.

Jesus leaves Tyre and goes to neighboring Sidon.  
He continues down toward the Sea of Galilee and then goes into the region of the Decapolis.

Now if you would just read that in the Bible you wouldn't think much about it.

But, the route Jesus took was a 300 mile circular detour on foot in the desert. Jesus obviously didn't have a GPS device. Commentators suggest that maybe Mark was not have been acquainted with the geography of Palestine.

But, I have a different suggestion.

I think that Jesus did this on purpose.  
Jesus wasn't just taking a vacation on the coast near Tyre.

Jesus wasn't just wandering around in the desert because like most men he failed to stop for directions.

The geography in this passage has a spiritual meaning.

The salvation of God has crossed the border.

Those who were totally deaf to the message of hope can now hear.

## THE DEAF HEAR

And of course that's why we have the next miracle story.

Jesus heals a man who is deaf and consequently cannot speak very well.

Jesus takes the man aside, and heals him.

Amazingly the man cannot only hear now he can speak perfectly.

One thing was true on both sides of the border.

People can't be quiet about a good miracle.

Jesus commands them, "Don't tell anyone."

And what do they do?

They tell everyone!

## 4,000 FED

In Mark, chapter eight we read that while Jesus is apparently still in Gentile country another crowd gathers in the wilderness. No doubt they had heard of this miracle worker named Jesus, and many desperate people have come to seek his help.

Jesus had compassion on this crowd of 4,000. They had been with him for three days without anything to eat. So Jesus feeds them with seven loaves and a few small fish. Once again there are big baskets of leftovers.

Some commentators wonder out loud why Mark recorded two stories that are so similar. I think the importance of this story lies in *where* it happens.

In Mark, chapter six the bread of God comes to the Jews. In Mark, chapter 8 the bread of God has crossed the border and has come to the Gentiles. Jesus comes to satisfy the hunger of Jew and Gentile alike.



## NO EAST OR WEST

There's a hymn that goes "in Christ there is no east or west." Charity does not begin at home. Charity begins wherever there is need, at home or abroad.

We see that in the places that Jesus goes and the people that Jesus feeds and heals. There is enough grace for everyone in the kingdom of God.

Grace knows no boundaries.  
Everyone is fed, and there are always leftovers.

I say it each time we take the Lord's Supper.

"This is the joyful feast of the people of God! People will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God."

Fred Craddock, tells the story of a missionary sent to preach the gospel in India near the end of World War II. After many months the time came for a furlough back home.

His church wired him the money to book passage on a steamer but when he got to the port city he discovered a boat load of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily.

These were the days when European Jews were sailing all over the world literally looking for a place to live, and these particular Jews were now staying in attics and warehouses and basements all over that port city.

It happened to be Christmas, and on Christmas morning, this missionary went to one of the attics where scores of Jews were staying. He walked in and said, "Merry Christmas."

The people looked at him as if he were crazy and responded, "We're Jews  
"I know that," said the missionary, " What would you like for Christmas?"

In utter amazement the Jews responded,

"Why, we'd like pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany."

So the missionary went out and used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for all the Jews he could find staying in the port.

Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States. As you might expect, his superiors wired back asking what happened to the money they had already sent.

He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews. His superiors wired back, "Why did you do that? They don't even believe in Jesus."

He wired back: "Yes, but I do."

In Jesus God expanded His kingdom considerably.  
The whole world is now a part of the Promised Land.

Grace knows no borders.  
All of God's children deserve to be healed and fed.

But, it's about more than just food and medicine.  
It's about the vision of a great heavenly banquet.

It's about the power and salvation of God coming to a desperate and deaf people.

It was in his darkest hour that Jesus gave his disciples the greatest symbol of hope.....bread broken and wine poured. As we now know it was a symbol of the fact that his body was broken and his blood was shed for the sins of the world.

In Jesus Christ our demons are defeated, and our sins are forgiven. In Jesus Christ we have hope....not only for this life but also for the life to come. In Jesus Christ grace crosses all borders and gives a word of hope to all people.

Amen.