

**SEPTEMBER 5, 2021**

**MARK 7.24-37**

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**Some friends have chided me that I have not gotten past the sixth century in my Christianity. My response, of course, is “what’s so bad about that?”**

**Sparing you the details, I will say that one set of books I enjoy browsing is actually a collection of comments on New and Old Testament texts made by Church Fathers (yes fathers) from the late first century up to the eighth. It was actually initiated by generally conservative evangelical seminary faculty who thought it would be a good idea to know the deep Christian tradition. We can only say hooray. When Anglicans and Episcopalians do battle with each other, they most often start and end with what the Fathers had to say about the controversy.**

**We are going to have a look at St. Mark’s account of Jesus and the Syrophoenecian woman in today’s Gospel.**

**Tertullian in third century Carthage, said in reference to this passage, “You women, as women, have the very same angelic nature promised as your reward, the very same sexual respect, as men. You have the same dignity in making moral judgments. This the Lord promised to women.”**

**Do you see why we have a look at tradition?**

**Said John of Damascus in the early eighth century about Jesus' attempt to stay anonymous in Tyre, "...when he wished to be hid he could not do so of himself because it pleased God that the Word be revealed in himself as having the limitations of human willing." Jesus had the limitations of human willing.**

**I share the ancients with you because this passage gets explained as the all-knowing god Jesus really was just testing the woman's faith. She passed the test, so she gets her daughter healed and Jesus presides over the scene. Tertullian and John of Damascus knew better.**

**The story is patently about a conflict between Jesus and this spunky woman/desperate mother, in which Jesus shows a harsh side seen in no other place in Mark's Gospel, not even with demons. Jesus has just come from a debate with the Pharisees over observing Jewish food laws. Needs a change, perhaps, he heads off to San Diego to get lost among Gentile strangers. Tough break, he goes into this house and this woman recognizes him straightaway.**

**As Professor John Donohue remarks, there is a lot of boundary crossing going on. Jesus has come from challenging Jewish law, has moved into very Gentile territory and talks with a woman. The woman is a) talking to a man, b) talking to an itinerant preacher which violates her social status, and c) is about to challenge a man.**

**Speaking of human limitations, here we see Jesus changing his mind. Take the story as it is and Jesus is having a crisis. I believe the woman and her compassion helps Jesus with his problem of how to honor Jewish law. Right here we see his defensiveness melt away with the woman's clever riposte and he then comes from his heart too. "Because of what you said, go home, the demon has left your daughter."**

**From now on especially he will be practicing a religion of the heart. No more does he see himself coming only to Israel. This is a pivotal moment. His vision has become inclusive. More healing follows, and soon he has table fellowship with a group of Gentiles. Thank you Madam. You helped Christianity include people like us.**

**Of course over and over the disciples don't get it. This should alert us to two levels of understanding in the Gospel, this one for the early Church. We certainly hear from St. Paul writing to Corinthians and Galatians that those communities often didn't get it either. Table fellowship—the good old potluck—was Jesus' favorite way of crossing boundaries, of sitting down with strangers different from him for heart-felt acquaintance. Times of conflict make boundary crossing more difficult, but hey, that's just what we do as Christian people. There should be two boxes on our annual report to the Diocese, for how often we shared food with others of our fellowship, and the number of times we had a picnic or crashed a party with people not well known to us. Charity**

**meals don't count if they are not egalitarian. Those would be worthwhile numbers. A standard for churches to judge themselves?**

**Just to get to know people, and for them to know you. Implicit in this behavior is a belief that the folks you break bread with do not necessarily need to become Christians, although we welcome them. Might be controversial--Not everyone is ready to accept that God loves all his children already, they don't have to be a this or a that, a moral beacon or an overachiever, to be held in God's loving arms. But it seems that Jesus behaved as if that were true. His conversions were to love and justice and well-being.**

**So you don't have to go to dinner with some other conversion agenda. The Syrophenecian woman, as John Donohue put it, "challenges [us] against setting limits to those who would be called sons and daughters of God."**