

**Sermon: Don't Think of an Elephant**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Mark 7:24-37**

Abe Lincoln once said that we should not believe everything we read on the Internet 'just because there's a picture with a quote next to it.' Things like that are called 'memes.' Most memes have an element of truth to them and they are often kinda funny, depending on how you look at it.

There is a similar meme on the Internet which says, in part, 'Travel cures racism.' Apparently, Mark Twain said that, but no one can say for sure. If our interpretation of today's reading is at all accurate, it may be that it was Jesus who first discovered that travel can indeed cure prejudices.

We just heard a story of persistence, insight, and trust, and we've seen Jesus literally take his work in new directions, so it might be helpful to know some geography.

Mark mentions two distinct regions. The first is north of Galilee, in the Roman province of Syria, and includes the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. This strip of land was once called Phoenicia, hence "Syrophoenician," also called Canaan, now Lebanon.

The second region is the Decapolis, ten cities located southeast of the Sea of Galilee. These were thriving, independent cities organized in a loose federation with their own culture, language and politics. This area formed the eastern edge of the Roman empire. The people in both regions were primarily Gentiles.

Now, in Mark's story so far, Jesus has healed the sick, raised the dead, **walked on water**, and fed the poor and hungry, lots of them. In return, his preaching has been *rejected* in his home town and his teaching and authority *challenged* by the Pharisees.

Today's passage intends to get us to reflect on the mystery of Jesus' identity. Immediately after his run-in with the Pharisees over unclean hands, Jesus seems to have had enough of the "celebrity rabbi" life style, so he heads north to Tyre where he could blend in, be alone, and get some rest. It doesn't quite happen that way.

A modern-day equivalent might be George Clooney vacationing in Antarctica to avoid the paparazzi only to find them waiting for him at McMurdo Station. In the winter.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells people not to reveal his true nature and mission. How are we to understand this in light of the very public nature of his teaching and healing? His disciples – nowhere to be seen in today's reading – expect him to fulfill a **political** kind of role, and for the most part, they don't see his divine nature. They don't completely understand who he is, and he doesn't want anyone to know in any case. But wherever he goes, Jesus cannot escape notice.

Let's try this experiment: **Don't think of an elephant.** Don't think of the thing I'm telling you not to think about. With Jesus, 'The more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.' By telling us – ordering us – not to tell anyone about his miracles and healings, the more we want to talk about it. 'I'm not supposed to tell anybody, but this Galilean opened my ears and loosened my tongue. Pass it on.'

Jesus' identity remains purposely elusive, even when people blab about it. And those people who do gain insight about Jesus often fail to appreciate its significance.

This passage from Mark is really two separate but connected episodes told back-to-back. In the first, Jesus' reputation somehow precedes him. The woman approaches him in a private home where he's trying to keep a low profile and she *begs* him for help. Remember, he's a Galilean man and she's a Canaanite woman. Multiple barriers – religious, social, cultural – come tumbling down in this story and Jesus' initial reaction might not be what Mark's audience expected to hear.

Modern audiences struggle with it too.

As we consider her a pagan, we don't expect her to have any experience with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We don't imagine that a shared faith is a conscious part of her every-day life and yet – with great **hope**, she persists in getting Jesus to help her because somehow, she has *heard* about him and has faith in him. All she knows is that she must find help for her daughter, as any mother would understand, and to her, this reclusive Galilean seems her best bet.

In the second episode, Jesus has returned to Galilee by way of Sidon, which is **north** from Tyre. At Sidon, he makes a turn south, in the same way that repentance represents a turn. This is very symbolic. Why go to the Decapolis from Tyre via Sidon?

In both cases, Gentiles are begging for help. This, I think, reflects another cultural reality. Previously, Jesus only dealt with God's children, the people of faith. These Gentiles fully expect to be turned away, and we can almost hear them say, "Look, there's a holy man right there; it couldn't hurt to just ask, right?" They don't know anything about Jesus except for the rumors they've heard. Faith has nothing to do with it. They need help and they're grasping at a very thin straw.

It was a working principle of the ancient Near East that riches indicated divine blessing and poverty and disease were a sign of God's disfavor. But the wisdom literature in the Bible – the books of Job and Ecclesiastes especially – warn us that God cannot be manipulated.

Jesus never supports the idea that disease is a punishment from God. He sees illness as an affliction from Satan and, as such, it is Jesus' natural mission to find and heal as many people as possible, and just as often, the afflicted come to him.

When Jesus pushes back and calls the woman a dog, we get indignant at the insult. 'That ain't right, Jesus,' we say. Whenever we react negatively to something Jesus says or does, it might mean that maybe we have put God in a box. But the woman doesn't back down. When she turns Jesus' metaphor around and gives it back to him, then he does the expected healing. Her persistence, hope, and her *words* convince Jesus to repent and put his new and expanding mission into action with other Gentiles.

So, imagine: a **pagan woman** helps a **Jewish man** realize that **God's abundance** can feed even 'the dogs under the table.'

We tend not to cross the kinds of boundaries that make us uncomfortable. We have known people who seldom, if ever, left their hometown for anything, except maybe to go to the mall. Some people would never think to enter a strange church, even when they seldom, if ever, attended their own church. As for me, when I worked as a chaplain intern, there were many times when I had to suck it up and enter a room to meet someone I didn't know and talk with them about their pain. It's hard to cross a threshold when we don't know what might be on the other side.

To escape the crowds and get some R&R, Jesus journeyed to a cultural desert, to a place where the Son of God would be a nobody among strangers. But in this figurative

desert, he was transformed by a woman's persistence, and he immediately set out toward another, literal desert and put his new attitude to practical use.

In Mark, "faith" means hanging onto Jesus and **expecting** him to heal and to save. This persistent, hopeful, and trusting woman makes us rethink what "faith" means for us. What if all she wanted was some spare change? Would we respond as Jesus did?

Deep down, we can relate to the woman's love for her daughter. Even though she's different from us, her concerns are familiar.

Today's passage shows us Jesus in his full humanity – by his initial reluctance to deal with the Gentile woman – and in his full divinity – by using his new, transformed way of thinking to heal the Gentile deaf-mute without question.

Scott Paeth, an ordained pastor in the UCC and an associate professor of religious studies, writes that Christ offers us "the possibility of transformation in our encounters with those of other faiths, opens up new possibilities for mutual understanding in the midst of religious diversity, and thrusts us out into the world to continue his mission of proclaiming the Good News of new life."<sup>1</sup> That about sums it up. Jesus models the mission of transforming our thinking and proclaiming the Good News.

We all have our own understanding of who Jesus is. And when we come to the Lord's Table, we encounter Jesus Christ and the mystery of his identity all over again when we share the bread and the cup.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

'Here is your God. He will come and save you' (Isaiah 35:4).

We just have to cross the threshold and ask.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Paeth, *Who Do You Say That I Am?: Christology and Identity in the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 2006), 20.