

The Inclusive Community

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 6, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Healing

Mark 7:24-37

Let us take today's passage at face value and speak of it exactly as Mark wrote it.

We find in these verses two intriguing mysteries at the outset. The first of these is the behavior and identity of the anonymous woman. The second of these is why you would go to Sidon, if you are in Tyre and wanted to go to the Decapolis. I suspect the second mystery is neither one that keeps you up late at night, puzzled, nor is it one you even care to discuss. In a busy life, it might be the last item on your agenda.

Let us begin with the anonymous woman. Jesus would not have met her had he stayed in Jewish territory. When he meets her, he seems unwilling to deal with Gentiles, so then why even venture outside Israel? Mark has Jesus go north of Galilee into Phoenicia (Lebanon) and Gentile territory and then into the house of someone who is never named because he "did not want anyone to know he was there."

Did Jesus come to get away from the crowds in Israel or for some other reason? We shall see. If he wanted to get away, there were many secluded places in Galilee. So why go into another country?

Nonetheless, he is in Tyre, about 50 miles south of present-day Beirut. Does he go there into Gentile territory, because he is already wondering about what to be for Gentiles? He is secluded in a house. A woman whose daughter was dreadfully ill and afflicted "heard about him." She is not Jewish but "she came and bowed down at his feet." She is desperate for help with the panic for a child's welfare that mothers understand better than anyone else.

Mark notes her religion (a Gentile, a pagan, an infidel) and her nationality (not from Israel, a Phoenician.) She is a stranger in every way. She begs for help for her daughter.

Jesus, untypically, seems distant, unresponsive, almost dismissive. He speaks of not giving children's food to dogs. The line is offensive to us. It is a little less so if we realize that he is

quoting a saying or idiom of the time. It also helps to know that the Greek word Mark uses is “puppies.”

Nonetheless, it is a rejection. Is Jesus talking to himself as much as to her? Is he saying, in effect, my calling is to the people of Israel. I cannot go into the Gentile world now. If I do a healing here, I must deal with Gentiles. And that will complicate my standing, already shaky, with reinterpreting Jewish law to Jewish authorities.

The woman senses an uncertainty in Jesus. He seems caught between mission and compassion, between ministry and politics.

She is clever. She stays with the categories of Jesus. She does not challenge that the Jewish community must be his first concern. She does not count herself as a child around the table. She is not asking for equality. She, therefore, fully respects his sense of mission and she works with his own idiom, his own words.

“Sir, even the dogs under the table” are allowed to eat the crumbs. Do not turn me away. My daughter, I, will take even a crumb.

A mother’s heart is understandable everywhere, in any time or age.

Jesus is jolted. He changes his mind, his mission. He tells her her daughter is safe, healed, whole.

Get this scene. She runs home, finds her daughter in bed. The demon is gone. On camera, we would want to see the mother’s face.

The woman understood Jesus better than many in Israel. She knew he had to be inclusive. Maybe she knew this better than he did at that moment. She does not push him to abandon his plan to focus on Israel. She only asks for a place, even at the margins, for all those who need his message.

If Jesus changed his behavior because of a mother’s heart and a woman’s voice, what might the Church have been if women had a more prominent role?

The second mystery is one that is not high on your agenda. If you are in Tyre and want to go to the Decapolis, why would you take the road to Sidon? I know this has troubled you in the past. Let me end the suspense and put you at rest on this issue.

The problem is this. Tyre is 25 miles south of Sidon. The Decapolis where Jesus is headed is 25 miles closer to Tyre than to Sidon. Tyre is 50 miles south of present- day Beirut. Something you always wanted to know.

To go 25 miles out of the way and to return does not make sense, especially since Jesus does nothing in Sidon except wander back and then head to Decapolis. Why Decapolis?

Decapolis is Gentile territory, actually a league of ten cities (hence, Decapolis) on the borders of Israel. The league is organized to keep out Jewish immigration and settlements.

So Jesus wanders for days or weeks in Gentile territory. Why would you do this if you have no mission to the Gentiles? In the Decapolis, he performs another miracle. A man, deaf with severely impaired speech is cured. Jesus asks him to tell no one. How do you do that? Everyone sees what happened.

The last line is a clue to the meaning of his whole passage today. “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Why is it a clue? Because the words repeat the words in Isaiah (35:5-6) about the future glory of Israel and the reign of the Messiah. It is a powerfully inclusive passage.

I suggest that Jesus takes this wild, illogical route, from Tyre, not back to Galilee but, staying in Gentile territory, north to Sidon and then into the Decapolis because he is sorting out the challenge from the anonymous, Gentile woman who told him he must not deny crumbs to those who are starving. Immediately after this, in chapter 8, Mark speaks of the multiplication of loaves. He is back in Israel but he is different.

Because of what happened in a foreign land and because of this woman whose religion was not Jewish, Jesus understands what it is to be the Messiah and to proclaim God’s inclusiveness. A Gentile girl in Tyre and a formerly deaf and speechless man in the Decapolis are part of Jesus’ family now even though they are not Jews. Jesus is changed by a mother’s heart and a man’s inability to communicate because he cannot speak clearly or hear the human voice.

In the house of a stranger somewhere in Tyre, Jesus learned from a woman that the bread of life must be multiplied for everyone who reaches for it and that no woman or man must go for crumbs under the table.

This may have been one of the most important journeys Jesus ever took. We, here, no one of us of Jewish faith, are in some ways the children of that anonymous woman who asked for crumbs and won for all of us a place at the table.