

A Bigger Heart

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Text: Mark 7:24-37

If you ever want to feel like an outsider, try crashing into another family's holiday celebration. At my first Christmas with my wife's family, we were all bringing food out to the table, and I saw this jar, with what looked like this greenish, yellowish jelly in it. As we ate dinner, the jar sat there, open but neglected, as everyone passed around all the other food. So finally I asked what this thing was. "Oh, that's the pickled watermelon rind. We always have that at Christmas. Oma loves it." (Oma was my wife's grandmother.) I pointed out that Oma wasn't there for Christmas that year, because Oma had grown older and no longer traveled. But it didn't matter. Nobody else wanted the pickled watermelon rind, but it was tradition! When you parachute down into another family's traditions, it's unfamiliar territory, and there are bound to be things that don't make sense to you.

Have you ever felt like an outsider? Sometimes it happens when you spend a holiday with new family members, and sometimes it happens when you travel to a foreign country where you don't know the language, or start a new job or begin a school year in a new class. You don't know the people, the customs are different, and there are unspoken rules you don't understand, and so you might decide you need to move cautiously through this new territory as you explore it.

But sometimes being an outsider or an insider gets bound up with differences of power. In a larger workplace, maybe there's an "old boys club" that holds the keys to success and advancement. In a community organization or a neighborhood association, maybe the views of the people who have been there longer count for more. There are lines, some of them visible, some of them not, that divide people into groups that have power, and groups that lack it.

Today's gospel story shows Jesus visiting the Gentile region of Tyre, a place where he's an outsider. It looks like Jesus is on a retreat. He up and leaves Galilee after a nasty argument with the religious insiders there, the Pharisees. But now he's in Gentile country, far from his fellow Jews. He's a backward laborer from the hills, come down to the cosmopolitan seaside territory that surrounds a city famous for its wealth and worldwide trading connections. Jesus is a Jew, and the Greek-speaking people of that world would have looked down on him for his backward customs and his standoffishness. These Jews abstained from eating foods that everyone else had no trouble with, so they'd never accept your invitation to dinner. What's more, they refused to join in the religious practices and civic observances, like worshipping the gods and goddesses that their pagan neighbors believed protected the cities they lived in. They were not community-minded, these Jews. They were unpatriotic! Jesus was definitely an outsider in Tyre.

And in any case Jesus did not go there to make friends! We're told that he entered a house and didn't want anyone to know he was there. Maybe he needed a break from the increasing tension between himself and the respected religious

establishment back home. Who knows? But whatever precautions he took to travel incognito were in vain, because a woman who lived in that region found out that this Jewish healer was in town, and she begged him to heal her daughter of the unclean spirit that afflicted her.

I don't like what Jesus said to her. He compared himself to a parent feeding his children. The children are Jesus' fellow Jews. And the woman who came to him in desperation, according to Jesus, is a dog, a dog begging for a bite of what by right belongs to the children. I don't like that Jesus called this woman a dog, as if she weren't human, as if she didn't bear the same image of God as the children of Abraham. And it's not as though he's never helped out someone who wasn't Jewish before... In the story Mark wrote about Jesus' life, he's already healed a Gentile man with an unclean spirit who lived in a cemetery. Is it that she's a woman? Or is it that she dared to *ask* for a divine blessing? I don't like the Jesus who says no in the face of hurt and need.

But it's worth understanding just what exactly he said. Jesus' "no" is not "never." What he says is, "Let the children be fed first." In Jesus' understanding of God's kingdom, there is a place for Gentiles, there is blessing for them too, but it comes later, after the Jews have been blessed. For him to have said this is still disappointing to my ears and my heart. After all, "Jews first," means a little girl continues to suffer today, and her mother's heart continues to ache today. But "Jews first" means "Gentiles later," not "Gentiles never."

And then something extraordinary happens. Jesus is an outsider in Tyre. The woman is an outsider to the kingdom as Jesus conceives it. Both are outsiders to one another, each of them too different to find grace and blessing in the other, and Jesus is simply pointing this out. But the woman doesn't give up. She says, "But when the children are eating, the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table." We may be outsiders to one another, the woman says. You may see me as a dog, and I may see you as a backward hillbilly kook. But I believe the God you serve is big enough to bring out a blessing for all of us.

And something snaps inside of Jesus, something softens. He tells her, "Go. Because you have said this, the demon has left your daughter, and it won't trouble her anymore."

I wonder what it was like for Jesus, to carry around God inside him, to carry around God who made the world and counts everybody in it as a person to be loved and cherished. I wonder what it's like to have a heart as big as God's pushing up and bursting from inside of you, a heart so big it can't fit inside any human heart. I bet it's like trying to put on children's clothes, like feeling them strain at the buttons and seams. If you wore those clothes, you'd break them. And I think Jesus' heart was always getting broken too. It was too small for the love of God inside him. But every time his heart broke open, God gave him a new heart, a heart big enough to care for the stranger, the foreigner, the sick person who came to him. It still wasn't big enough for God. But it was big enough for the woman with the sick little girl. It was big enough for today. And tomorrow he would have to have his heart broken open all over again. Tomorrow God would have to give him another, bigger heart again.

And the next time a Gentile in need comes to Jesus he doesn't hesitate, but puts his hands inside the man's ears—an unthinkable gesture for someone worried about "Gentile dogs"—and heals him. Jesus, fully human, fully God, is living with a bigger heart, a heart that is still not big enough to contain the fullness of God's ocean of powerful love, but big enough for today.

As followers of Jesus, we're meant to follow him in having our hearts broken, over and over, made big enough, wide enough to meet the neighbors God sends our

way.

I grew up hearing stories about Ruedi, the German refugee who lived with my mother's family when she was a child in the 1940s and 50s, a young man who had fled from the Soviet army as it advanced, losing his home and his family and arriving in America with next to nothing. It wasn't easy living together—for one thing, there was only one bathroom for a family that now comprised six people! For another thing, Ruedi had grown up steeped in the ideology of the Third Reich, and so he came with some distorted ideas about why the Second World War was fought and what each side stood for. But this refugee found a home with my mother's family, and they found a friend who delighted them by teaching them German drinking songs, and whose family is a part of their family to this day. I think about this story when I hear people talk today about what it means to welcome refugees, and whether it's safe, and whether it means sacrificing too much of the good things that belong to our country. I think about those six people crammed into a small house, who found a blessing in each other by recognizing and welcoming the stranger as a neighbor sent from God.

Who's on the edge of your circle—not necessarily someone from across the world, not necessarily someone you need to go looking for, but someone immediately in front of you, asking for your concern? Where is God testing the boundaries of your circle of trust, pushing you to extend a healing hand? I want to challenge you to go through this next week with an awareness of such people around you. You'll know God is pushing on the edge of your circle when you feel anxious, that there's not enough time, not enough money, not enough energy to go around. "Let the children be fed first," Jesus said. But if you let go, you may find as he did, in the very next healing he performed, looking up into heaven with a sigh, that the grace that was big enough and strong enough to find you and bring you home is big enough to share. Amen.