

Called to the Edges
Mark 7: 24-37

Have you ever been somewhere when it was obvious you were the outsider? You are the one with the accent, the one who didn't quite understand local customs and vernacular, the one who is acutely aware of your difference. We all have our preconceptions of other regions, other cultures, other faith traditions, other - *and* others have notions of who we are. In our world today there is a noticeable push to move us into rigid boxes by nationality, political ideology, region, and so many other artificial but very real divisions. From there, the slide to judgment and ostracism picks up traction, sending us behind walls and disintegrating what was meant to be God's beloved community. The pressure squeezes upon us to conform, to be like others, to stay sheltered, and to summarily condemn and reject others not like us. It is a clear and present danger to our community, to this country, to the world, and above all, to our faith. God calls us to a greater community; to go to the edges; to seek the marginalized, the rejected, the other. Our call is not to bring others to join us but to walk together into the vast expansiveness of God. It is not only the struggle of life today; it has marked the story of faith since time began.

As the text begins this morning Jesus has left Galilee and ventured into Tyre, a Roman colony 250 miles north of his home in Nazareth. At one time Tyre was one of the most important cities in the vast Phoenician Empire, but it was destroyed by Alexander the Great in his ruthless march to conquer the world. A few centuries later at the time of Jesus Tyre was rebuilding, reasserting itself once more as a major shipping port of the Roman Empire. Though their history and cultures were neighbors and often intertwined, there was a large gulf between Tyre and the Jews, one centered in their faith traditions. Jesus chose to go to a region where *he* would be the outsider, the one who would not be welcome. It does not make much sense until one looks at what led to Jesus' escape. It was an increasing resistance from his own people and an awareness of the growing clash between his faith in God and the faith he was told he was supposed to embrace. It was becoming an untenable position, one that would certainly end in a final confrontation.

Jesus and his followers were targets on the Pharisees' radar screen. Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, he encouraged his disciples to further break the strict Sabbath laws by picking grain so they

could eat, Jesus claimed that he had the authority to forgive sins. This time, however, the accusations revolved around something much less spectacular - washing hands. As part of being considered clean in the eyes of God, all Jews were required to wash their hands before eating. It had nothing to do with sanitary conditions and everything to do with strict ritual observation. The Pharisees noticed that the disciples did not wash their hands before they ate. A seemingly minor infraction to our eyes perhaps, but it was one the Pharisees grasped tightly and questioned Jesus. This time Jesus was neither patient nor conciliatory. In his sharp answer to them, he quoted from the prophet Isaiah summarizing the heart of the gulf between faith as it was meant to be and faith as it had become in practice:

This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.¹

For the Jew, especially for the leadership, faith and righteousness had become equated with a strict adherence to ritual. Jesus took faith back to its roots as a matter of the heart and how one lived and interacted in the world. In his view all the tradition in the world mattered little in matters of faith if how one lived reflected evil or careless intentions toward others. As passionate as Jesus was about this living faith of the heart, there remained a learning opportunity for him in Tyre, an encounter in which he himself was confronted and found himself at the edges in an unexpectedly expanded view of what it meant to be God's good creation.

Though Jesus tried to find anonymity in Tyre, a woman found him, interrupting his solitude. Though not a Jew, all she wanted was help for her daughter. Even in this foreign land his reputation as a healer was known. His answer was less than pastoral and definitely not what we would expect from Jesus. "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.'² Though I have been chastised and told that Jesus did not mean that the way it sounded, I am not alone in saying that I simply cannot spin that statement into a positive light. Jesus was in another culture and told someone of that region that to give her the gift of healing would be considered like

¹ Mark 7: 6b-8 NRSV

² Mark 7: 27 NRSV

throwing food to the dogs. The term for dogs was not one used for pets but a derogatory, demeaning expression for scavengers, a clear insult to this desperate mother. Undaunted the woman pressed Jesus reminding him that even the dogs could have the crumbs under the children's table. Her words reflected the startling concept of God's grace not limited by culture, ethnicity, or even faith tradition. As Jesus moved south back in the direction of home, that lesson walked with him as he encountered a deaf man, also a foreigner, who was unable to communicate with others in any way. This time Jesus responded with an intimate compassion, touching the man and healing him, restoring him to life in community.

Two miracles - one originating in initial reluctance because the woman was considered to be an inferior outsider according to Jesus' culture and worldview and a second that embraced the outcast and made him whole. For Jesus it was a progression in awareness of the reality of the breadth of God's beloved community. Faith is like that. We can have intellectual discussion, perhaps even dabble in areas that challenge our preconceptions. We can talk about equal rights and dignity for all people. We can point out the injustices that pervade our society. But then the edges enter our lives and sit down in our living rooms. At this point, our call to follow becomes uncomfortable and terrifyingly real.

This is a puzzling text because this Jesus of Mark's Gospel, who just a few verses earlier was criticizing the Pharisees quite vehemently about their own hypocrisy and rigid faith practices, seemed devoid of compassion and turned his back on a woman in need - all because she was not like him. Yet when confronted with his own bias, he paused and realized that God's grace was before him in the form of a woman he had compared to a scavenger dog. It was the reality of her painful honesty and her great need that forced him to realize the depth of his own call to "bring good news to the poor, ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...".³ When a deaf man, also a foreigner, was brought to him for healing, his response then was one of radical intimacy, of touching the untouchable, and offering him new life. The words he had spoken to the Pharisees calling for a living faith of the heart were now firmly rooted in his soul.

Differences, otherness, while part of the beautiful diversity of God's creation, can be uncomfortable. We don't always know what to do with that which is not like us, that which we do not

³ from Luke 4: 18 NRSV

understand, that which we find frightening. We label, force people into boxes not of their own making, develop judgments based on our limited perceptions, and shove away. We classify and reject. This past week I was fortunate to hear columnist Leonard Pitts speak. Though his talk centered on racism, the overarching concept can be applied to becoming God's beloved community in this jagged, divided world in which we find ourselves today. Pitts said, "Who are we if we push beyond the discomfort of anger and guilt to see who we can be on the other side? Can we find redemption together?"⁴ When we are called to the edges, as we are, it is not only to the edges to find people who are not like we are, but to the edges of our own comfort, to challenge our own ideas of other people and of what God's community is to be. It is when we reach those edges and push beyond them, we *can* find redemption, we discover the fullness of God.

While Church will always be a home of rest and renewal and a place to learn and grow, by its very definition, to be Church is to move forward, to stretch, to reach. Church in Greek is ἐκκλησία, which means literally the called-out-ones. We were never created to be insular and drawn into protective shells or to be confined by physical, emotional, or spiritual walls but to go. We are called to the edges - and beyond. We might not be clear on the details of this church beyond the edge, but we do know that it is defined by a living faith of loving grace, one that is a reflection of God's own heart. What we have now is a beginning, a sneak preview of who we can become as individuals, a snippet of what it means to be God's beloved community. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth at the end of the famous love chapter: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."⁵

So, supported and motivated by the love of God, we keep pushing at those edges, both the outer edges of society and the inner edges of our hearts, at all those edges that keep us from being the community we were created to be. When we hit the edge and are told that rights are negotiable and exclusive, we push beyond the edge to a world of God's equality. When we hit the edge and are given

⁴ Leonard Pitts. *The United States of Amnesia*. A speech given at Jefferson Community College, Watertown, New York. February 8, 2018.

⁵ I Corinthians 13: 12-13 NRSV

the message that justice is grounded in wealth and power, we push back to let 'justice roll down like waters'. When we hit the edge and are told that peace can only be achieved through war, we push back with an incomprehensible peace that is found deep within our souls. When we hit the edge with the message that we are too small or inadequate or lacking in any way, we push back with God's message that we can be far more than anything we can ask or imagine. That is who we are as Church. More importantly, that is who God is.

In a sermon given at the Riverside Church in New York in 1967, exactly one year before his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter - but beautiful - struggle for a new world... This is the calling of the [children] of God..."⁶ Let us dare to walk to the edges of our world, to reach into the edges of our hearts, and dream of who we can become. Then with the vision of God's community as our guide, let us follow the call of God into that new world. Let us pray.

Eternal God, you call us to ventures, of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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⁶ <https://www.wagingpeace.org/the-words-of-dr-martin-luther-king-jr-delivered-at-riverside-church-new-york-city/>