

The Love of Strangers
Text: Mark 7:24-30
Preached: September 10, 2006
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At the beginning of the summer, I asked you to share with me sermon topics that you might like covered in summer sermons. I proceeded to preach on none of them. They were really wonderful sermon topics, and I intend, eventually, to get to them. For today, I want to touch on the most popular topic listed by congregants: Immigration and border issues. The passage from Mark lends itself very well to considering just that. By no means do I intend to give any kind of exhaustive analysis of U.S. immigration policy and a clear path forward. I have no such thing to offer. But rather, I want to share some reflections, opinions, on how the gospel might suggest we *be* the church, with regard to the stranger and the alien in our midst.

A general criticism is levied at those who graduate from mainline Protestant seminaries. Namely, that we don't share with our congregations everything that we learned. I suppose the attitude among preachers is that, "Well, they wouldn't quite understand it," or "It would take too much explanation." I don't think that's the case with you all. So receiving that criticism, I press forward and try all the more to share the various insights that I and others learned in seminary.

The nature of the gospels. That's one thing that we learned about. There are four canonical gospels. Three of them, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are referred to as the synoptic gospels. Synoptic – of one eye, a synthesized eye. Which means that if you read them, you realize there is a lot of parallelism between the stories in those three.

What we learn in seminary is that these gospels were not crafted, were not composed, totally independently of one another. Rather, Mark, whom we read today, wrote his gospel before the others. A Matthew and Luke used Mark's gospel narrative to craft their own. If you compare these three gospels and their stories, you can see how Luke and Matthew both looked to Mark, drew out some of the same things, but also made changes and added material to their own gospels.

It's actually incredible how similar they are. In fact, independent eyewitness accounts would not be quite so similar. If, for example, all of us were to file out on the street, and were to witness an accident and then, without conferring with one another, we were to write our account of the accident, consider how different the accounts would be. Differing in length and detail. Some would remember it was this kind of car or that color. So, it's actually quite remarkable that the synoptic gospels are as similar as they are. But it's because they were crafted in communities of people who shared stories orally. But Mark was the first.

What Mark recorded was not an exact account of exactly what Jesus said and did. Such an account is not available to us. Mark speaks to us, through his own interpretive

lens, not only about what Jesus said and did, as was reported, but also about the concerns of Mark's community.

I hope I am making myself clear. When we read, for example, this story, we may ask whether these were Jesus' actual words. If, by "Jesus," we mean one solitary individual that can be studied the way an individual can be interviewed today, the answer must be *no*. If we mean the person Jesus, who's life still had vibrancy within Mark's community, whom they remembered and whose story they sought faithfully to convey, then the answer must be *yes*.

If by his words we mean an exact dictation of what he said, no way. If by his words we mean the essence of his personality and message, shining through the community of Mark, absolutely.

So when we consider the passage about faith of the Syrophenician woman, we must ask, "What was the concern of Mark's community?" There was a very pressing concern, and it was this: "Must one become a Jew before becoming Christian?" It was huge. It may not have the same impact on us that it had then. But it was a huge point of struggle within the early church.

We could put it in our context by saying, "As you look around, and as we celebrate the diversity that we have in this congregation, are all groups in our wider community reflected here?" No. And yet we proclaim a message of inclusion. This is a very live question for us. With the value we place on inclusiveness and diversity, what then must we *do* to reflect that value in our community? This is very much the same question that Mark's community was asking.

In the passage about the Syrophenician, Jesus has made his way from Galilee, his home region, into another region. It is possible that this was the furthest Jesus ever went from where he was born and raised. He's in foreign territory. He is the stranger. And there he enters a home.

In this passage, the humor in Mark's gospel comes out in two ways. First, everything happens *immediately*. It is as if Jesus lives his whole life immediately. He tells a story, then immediately moves on. He performs a healing, then he immediately moves on to something else. We get the sense of a frantic Jesus immediately doing everything.

Secondly is the idea that Jesus tries to keep his message and his ministry a secret. Good luck. There are some wonderful juxtapositions in Mark where Jesus strictly commands his disciples and other witnesses not to tell anybody about what they have seen or heard. "And the news spread like wildfire throughout the region."

As you can probably guess, and this is my guess, Jesus needs a break. He needs a retreat and he goes far away from home in order to do just that. He goes to Tyre. Maybe he's tired, so he goes to Tyre to get a little rest. And there he is in the home

of some supporter. And just then, in this moment of solace and sanctuary inside this house, maybe he's just about to set into some really good food, a woman comes and she's in great need. And not only that, she's not of his clan. She's not of his race. She's not of his religion. She's not one of the chosen people. She's of *that* land, that foreign land. A Syrophenician woman, and she asks Jesus, "Please, help me."

She is distraught. Her daughter is with a demon, which today means seriously ill or maybe mentally ill. Whatever it is, she's in a huge crisis and she's at her wit's end. It's probably the case that she is the sole adult in her household because, otherwise, they would have sent the man to go do that. She would have stayed with her daughter, to care for her daughter, and the husband would have gone to speak with this great Jewish rabbi. But instead, she goes, herself.

His response is shocking, and we have to come to grips with it. Jesus, our gentle Jesus, the healer, calls her a *dog*. He says, "You will not receive this healing. This healing is for the chosen people. Dogs don't eat from the table of the chosen people."

You can read this in a couple of different ways. You can decide, which I refuse to, that he's just a jerk. Or, you can decide that he has some real sense of his Jewish chosenness, that he understands his ministry, at that time, as being focused on his own people. Perhaps in the state he's in, tired and worn out, he just doesn't want to deal with her and finds the best excuse he can. "You know, you're not one of us, this isn't really meant for you. Go away."

If that is your reading, then you must agree that the woman eventually changes Jesus' mind. She convinces Jesus that the grace of God, in his ministry and his teaching, overflows enough that it's now available to all people. If that's your reading, then the Syrophenician woman is the reason why you and I are here right now, why Christianity didn't remain a Jewish movement.

Another reading would interpret Jesus, in his own way, giving the woman the line, letting her teach whoever else happened to be standing around. She came barging in, demanding that this man heal her daughter. And Jesus used very harsh words, and perhaps words that those who are with him in the house would have just nodded along with. "Oh, it's this crazy woman again." And Jesus calls her a dog and says that neither she nor her daughter are worthy of the healing. "Yeah, that's right. You sid it. It's only for us." But he gives her the line. She, the woman, the worthless, the powerless, the weak, teaches, everyone who happened to be standing around. She said, "Even the crumbs fall from the Master's table."

It's not the only time Jesus does this in the Gospels. Recall the woman caught in the very act of committing adultery. Jesus does not say, "No one condemns you." He says, "Has no one condemned you?" He gives *her* the line: "No one sir." He encourages her to claim her own power, as he has does with this Syrophenician woman. He then responds, "For saying that, you may go. The demon has left your daughter."

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An interaction of strangers. An interaction of people of different races. Sound familiar? An interaction of cultures, one of which sees itself as entitled to all of the riches of the world. The other, which is just hoping for a few crumbs.

There's no question that the situation on our border is one of crisis. But from a Gospel perspective, the crisis is not so much a threat to an already dominant culture, but a threat to the lives and the livelihood of the most vulnerable among us, who face overwhelming odds, swimming, crawling, running through deserts, looking for just a few crumbs.

A few years ago, I took a group of teenagers to the El Paso/Juarez border. What a stark contrast we witnessed. One of our activities was to walk across the bridge from El Paso into Juarez. Nobody noticed us. Nobody checked papers. We just walked right across. What a stark difference between the infrastructure on one side versus the lack thereof on the other. And, of course, there on the other side was a van waiting to pick us up.

The van brought us to a community center, which was built by a - it would not be accurate to say American or even North American - a United Statesian, who serves the people of that Juarez community, most people of whom lived in houses made out of cardboard, tin, and cinderblock, which barely keep out the elements.

His name was Frank, and he was always preaching. Every word that came out of his mouth was part of an ongoing sermon about the Gospel and about the border. He told us the story of a trip he made to El Paso to give a presentation to a group of business people who were offering to support the community center. The meeting was on the top floor of a large, luxurious hotel in El Paso. He gave this presentation and people gave very generously to his community center. But he said, no matter how well fed or well treated he was, he could not wait to get back across the border to Juarez because, as he told it, "When Jesus comes back, I don't want there to be any question of which side I'm on." His life was to live with the poor of Juarez. He was very aware of the divide across that border.

We visited brand new bluejean factories along that border that weren't there ten years earlier. They had popped up after NAFTA had passed and had caused Juarez's population to swell, many of whom could only afford to live in the dire conditions around the community center.

In the face of the great border divide, what are we to do, as a church? The book which constitutes our identity as a people, we are admonished us to be kind to the stranger. Our book even uses the word "alien." It reminds us, "You too were once aliens. You too wandered in the desert."

We need to advocate for just immigration policies in the as many ways that we can. We need to move beyond seeing things in black and white. Our Homeland Security

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issue, which is a real issue, has blanketed all of our thinking so that we see things in only in black and white. A family trying to get across to get just a few crumbs from the Master's table is not the same as a terrorist. It's not the same context. And if we suddenly criminalize illegal aliens in the same way that we would criminalize potential terrorists, we're falling into a very myopic view.

We are to *be* the church in the world. The church is not ultimately a building, an institution, or even a people. The church is always a "doing." It's a happening, an event. The church happens at a ranch house in the desert near San Antonio. It's owned by Roger. He visits it only two weekends during the month, so, most of the month, there's nobody there. But running water comes out of spigots and it is a place to rest. Roger is there so seldom, he puts a sign on the door that says, "Please turn the water off and please close the door." Whenever he goes, he brings food and whenever he returns, the food is gone. That's the church. That's the church being the church in the middle of the desert.

The Syrophenician woman taught us that grace cannot be contained to a cup or a table or a culture or a country or an economy. Grace is grace because it overflows. And Christians are those who look out for those who are the least among us, the poorest among us. We are not to scapegoat those very same people and regard ourselves as righteous because we call ourselves Christian. In fact, the gospel of Mark goes to great pains to point out that those who think they get it are often the ones who miss the crucial message. And those who are outside of the community, like this woman, are the ones who get. Amen.