

Fourteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): "God Isn't Finished With Us Yet"
Isaiah 35:4-7a, Psalm 146, James 2:1-10, 14-17, Mark 7:24-37
September 4-5, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

You can take this as good news or bad news: "God isn't finished with us yet!" This may seem like a foreign concept, but even Jesus was "a work in progress." Even **His** heart, during His life on this earth, could be pried open a little wider. Today's Gospel is one of the best examples of that. Jesus' first response to the mother who pleads with Him to deliver her daughter from the demon that torments her is "No." I'm torn between hating and loving this Gospel. I **hate** to see our Lord being dismissive of anyone, and I **love** the woman's love for her child that overrides any fear of rejection she might have.

We think of Jesus as perfect (of course!), but we can forget He was fully **human** as well as fully **divine**. None of us knows everything from the get-go. To be human is always to be on a learning curve. In the second half of this story, Jesus opens up the deaf man's **ears**. In the first half of the story, the Holy Spirit opens up Jesus' **heart** to the plea of the Gentile woman.

Gentile. Woman. Being those two things were her problems, in addition to whatever her daughter's problem was. In the morning Jewish men would pray, "Thank you, God, I am not a Gentile, I am not a woman, I am not a slave." Jesus was the Good Shepherd all right, but He was also an observant Jewish male, and in this story He is accosted by this pagan female, when all He's hoping for is some time off from the grind of ministry. St. Mark tells us:

^{24b}[Jesus] entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an

unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.
(Mark 7:24b-25)

The Message paraphrase describes the child as a “disturbed daughter.” As usual, when the evangelist writes that a person is possessed by a demon, we really don’t know what that looks like or how we’d describe the situation today. It’s enough for us to know the child was not herself, severely disturbed in some way that pained mother as well as daughter.

So here’s another instance when it’s not the person in need of healing who approaches Jesus, but a loved one of the sick person who serves as an advocate. Can you think of other examples? How about:

- Jairus, a synagogue VIP, who went to Jesus and “*begged him repeatedly*” to save his little girl who was “*at the point of death*”? (Mark 5:23)
- The friends of the paralyzed man who hoisted him up to the roof, dug through the thatch, and used ropes to lower his litter into the crowded room where Jesus was preaching? (Mark 2:1-12)
- The father of the (probably) epileptic boy who, in the midst of his fits, had rolled into water and nearly drowned and rolled into fire and nearly been burnt? (Mark 9:14-29)
- The centurion who sent word to Jesus, beseeching Him to heal his slave? (Luke 7:1-10)

I’m torn here. I want to emphasize “We all need advocates at one time or another!” But I also don’t want to lose the other thought, “God isn’t finished with us yet!”

The mother of the disturbed child is a strong advocate. She’s not dissuaded when Jesus tells her that the children’s food shouldn’t be thrown to the dogs under the table.... The meaning is clear: she and her child are in the category of Gentile dogs, not the chosen people. How would **we** have responded? I’m afraid I would have either burst into tears or lashed out verbally in anger. But this woman (I wish we knew her name....) keeps her cool and keeps her focus. She has come to seek her daughter’s healing. That is all that matters.

So she calmly responds, *“Of course, Master. But don’t dogs under the table get scraps dropped by the children?”* (Mark 7:28, *The Message*) Wow, she thought quickly on her feet!

Jesus was impressed. “You’re right! On your way! Your daughter is no longer disturbed. The demonic affliction is gone.” She went home and found her daughter relaxed on the bed, the torment gone for good.

(Mark 7:29-30, *The Message*)

Jesus changed His mind. It’s been said that prayer, intercession for ourselves and others, changes us, not God. But undeniably there are times in Scripture when God’s mind and Jesus’ heart **are** changed by heartfelt pleas, often on behalf of someone else. Last week our hymn of the day was “Change My Heart, O God.” That would have been a good choice for this week, too ☺. But an even “more favorite of mine” is this week’s hymn of the day: “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy.” It reminds me that the Lord wants to change my heart to become more like God’s heart, that:

...the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
But we make this love too narrow by false limits of our own;
and we magnify its strictness with a zeal God will not own. (ELW 587)

“God isn’t finished with me yet,” and part of the work God still has to do is to show me my prejudices and clue me into the times when I’m throwing people crumbs, as if they were dogs under the table, rather than inviting them to be seated beside me at the table. Of what forms of favoritism am I guilty? That’s the tie-in with today’s lesson from the Letter of James:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ... You do well if you really fulfill the royal law... “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted.... (James 2:1, 8-9)

I can't see my own blind spots! I need them to be pointed out to me. The Holy Spirit is more than happy to do so, more than capable of doing so. I better be careful what I pray for!

There was an article published at the beginning of the summer but which I just got around to reading this past week. Amazingly, it referenced today's Gospel. The story quoted a female theologian discussing the role of women in a church which does not ordain women but has just formally opened up the roles of lector, acolyte and catechist to them. She said:

“A framework that makes people beg for scraps from the table like dogs is dehumanizing... The call to justice in the church involves rearranging, expanding the table, so that entire groups of people are no longer dependent on crumbs.”¹

Who are the individuals and the groups of people whom we deem unworthy to sit at our table, at the Lord's Table, at any table, with us? Whom do we wall off from enjoying the blessings we share in our families, our communities, our nation? “God isn't finished with us yet” **if** we're humble enough to have our blind spots exposed and persistent in our desire for the Holy Spirit to change our hearts to become more like God's heart. Amen

¹Joshua J. McElwee, “Bishop Apologizes to fired LGBTQ Catholic educator at theology gathering” (*National Catholic Reporter*, Vol. 57, No. 19, June 25-July 8, '2021), p. 7.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham