

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 9.6.15

Scripture: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Mark 7:24-31

Soon after Toby was born, I read an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, a long-form piece on the plight of children in the poorest town in the poorest county of Texas. Every single child there was at the time at risk of contracting diabetes and other illnesses tied to obesity. Nearly every school-aged child was already overweight, and would be nine pounds more so at the end of the next school year, given typical caloric intake and lack of exercise.

But the image that stuck to me, that I couldn't shake, wasn't about food; it was about sleep. Speaking of a girl about 10 years old, the article notes that she was never put to bed, had never had a bedtime: "...she was used to falling asleep around midnight from sheer exhaustion."

Toby was a few months old then and, in the months since becoming a mother, I'd grown crazed with the need to care for him. This included, of course, a bedtime. Around 7 PM, I'd sit in the rocking chair Jesse had made for me, made for us, of a Shaker furniture kit; and I'd nurse Toby until he fell asleep in my arms, and then I'd lay him in his crib a short reach from the chair—our tiny house holding it all. He was asleep for the night at 7:15, exactly 7:15. For a number of weeks, every night I'd notice it was 7:15 once again that he was for the night asleep.

And it was so gratifying to me. It was so gratifying—but not because I could now have some time to myself with Jesse. It wasn't about that. I can't say exactly what it was about. But I remember wishing that same gratification on all those children in Texas who weren't being put to bed—the children and their parents who never knew the sweet intimacy of bedtime. How I longed to go there and help all those children get to sleep.

I read another article about home-laboratories in the Midwest where down-on-their-luck people had turned to making and using and selling crystal-meth. This phenomenon was sweeping through towns and counties. And why not? After all, these people's lives were hard, and sometimes hopeless; and

meth is cheap and easy to make, and it induces euphoria and increases libido. A hard life can become a seemingly great life in just a few simple steps.

And so it was having a shockingly swift social effect—a baby-boom among people who had few resources for, and still less interest in, caring for children. Church groups and other outreach centers were even collecting children from families that were just giving them away, which likely was salvation to many abandoned children. One who wasn't so lucky, still at home among her family, crawled onto a lit hotplate, then screamed and died while her parents slept off their high. This was just mentioned in the article—a side point; but it's fleshed out in my mind as if I'd seen it myself.

It was around this time that I stopped reading the paper, and stopped watching certain movies and T.V. shows. “These are beyond my sphere of concern,” I told myself. These were things beyond my sphere of control, so they needed also to be cast as beyond my sphere of concern. I can't do anything about it, so why know anything about it? It was self-protective, and it became something of mantra: “These are beyond my sphere of concern.”

Tyre, the city, the region, was beyond Jesus' sphere of concern. Tyre: this was a place far away, further away than any place Jesus is remembered to have gone. Tyre: this was surrounded on all sides by the sea, connected to land only by a causeway that Alexander the Great had built in the 4th century before Christ; an aerial map has it drawn like a thought-balloon in a comic book, as if the mainland of Syria were but imagining it.

The people there were Syrophonecian, which is to say Gentiles. But they weren't a particularly upsetting people to the Jews. It's not like they were Samaritans or something. In general, these two nations had little concern for each other. Actually, historically, there had been trade between them. King David bought some cedar from the King of Tyre, and hired some craftsmen from the city. King Solomon bought cedar and pine from their king in exchange for wheat and olive oil, and he enlisted their help in the building of the Temple. But all that was nearly 1,000 years earlier. It can hardly be said to have influenced Jesus' setting out for Tyre.

What's more, there's little mention of this city in New Testament. Earlier in this gospel narrative, Mark notes that Jesus attracted followers from a long list of places, the final in the list being Tyre. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is remembered to have said that even Tyre will fare better in the final judgment than the cities of Judea and Israel that rejected him. In the book of Acts, Tyre is mentioned as having been conquered by Herod Agrippa and as a place where Paul landed on one of his sea voyages. But all in all, Tyre is inconsequential, which is to say that there was no conceivable reason for Jesus to make this trip, this very long trip, to Tyre.

On the other hand, this might well have been the point. "He went away," the narrative tells us, "and entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there."

Mark's gospel is alone in its believing that Jesus was revealed as the Christ in his young adulthood. Matthew and Luke both give us nativity narratives, stories of Jesus as an "Infant King." Though their details vary, both agree that Jesus' coming was foretold by visits from angels, his conception was by the Holy Spirit, and his birth was marked by hardship and grace—so from his beginning, Jesus was set apart. For his part, John confesses Christ to have been revealed as such at the beginning of time, as the word of God that was in the beginning with God for it was God—so, the apparent fact that Jesus was the word made flesh was unsurprising at least to Jesus. How he became conscious of this is not something John—or indeed any of these three gospels—ever makes clear. How he came into his Christ-consciousness, and therefore Christ-comfortableness, isn't ever spelled out. But at least in the other three gospels, Jesus does have the length of his lifetime to grow into this as a concept, as an identity.

Not so in Mark. Mark's Jesus is proclaimed to be the Christ at his baptism, when he was perhaps 30 years old. Indeed, the voice that came from heaven to make this proclamation is remembered to have addressed not the crowd gathered at the river, as if to tell them something they don't already know, as happens in Matthew ("This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am

well pleased.”). No, in Mark, the voice from heaven addresses Jesus himself, as if to tell him something he didn’t already know: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And who knows whether this came as good news?

Who knows whether this came as intelligible news?

Of course, we don’t know if this even came as news. Perhaps Jesus had begun to suspect something of himself. Maybe he’d begun to notice he was peculiar among his peers. Maybe he’d long perceived that there was something singular about himself. Then again, what adolescent doesn’t think of himself as truly unique? Or is that just adolescence in our individualist culture?

On the other hand, it’s possible that Jesus really had not considered himself in any way that resembled the proclamation of that heavenly voice. God’s Son, God’s Beloved: this might have been entirely new. Or how about this: perhaps he hadn’t considered himself at all. Perhaps he wasn’t in the habit of thinking about himself, his identity, his purpose, him, him, him. Perhaps he never tended to such self-centered naval-gazing—and maybe it’s this characteristic that opened the way for him to be the Christ. Not self-centered, but self-giving, not self-interested but self-emptying: these things that are central to being Christ perhaps began in him as being uniquely un-naval-gazing.

What that actually meant in the world, though: what self-giving actually looks like when played out: he still had to learn that.

He was about to meet his teacher.

Meanwhile, of these things all we can do is wonder. With Mark’s gospel in particular, all we can do in regard to so much is merely wonder. Mark shows us Jesus in action, but he doesn’t explore much of Jesus’ inner life, he doesn’t do much theologizing or Christologizing—which gives us a wide field of play. But it also lands us right up against the hard core of this encounter of Jesus in Tyre—a hard core that every sermon in every mainline Protestant this morning is trying to crack open in the hope of finding something soft and warm and redeeming inside. Jesus was a jerk. He called a little girl who was suffering

something scary and strange a dog. Indeed, he called this little girl a little dog, and we'd like to understand why. What motivated him? What was he thinking? Was he being clever, winky and ironic, a proto-hipster? Was he testing this poor woman—testing her for resilience, persistence, faith? Did he have his wits about him, or did he really not? Mark tells us nothing.

But here's something we do know, that Jesus, alone here, was perhaps so for the first time and he wanted it that way. He didn't make this trip with his disciples, and more importantly he'd at last managed to shake the crowd that had (yes) dogged him. It's been seven pressing chapters—seven short, pressurized chapters—since he'd learned that he was God's Son. And now he was perhaps starting to understand what such a thing meant. Moreover, now he was perhaps starting to feel that, if this was good news, then it was so for everyone but himself.

But not everyone. Right? How could it be good news for everyone? How could he be here for everyone? Everyone: that's certainly beyond the scope of his control, so it just had to be beyond the scope of his concern. And so he made this trip to Tyre, an all-but-inaccessible city away from everyone he knew; so he surrounded himself only with people whom he didn't know and who moreover didn't know him.

Here at last he might rest.

Here at last he might collect himself.

And yet even here he couldn't escape notice. This is what the narrative tells us, that he could not escape notice. How this notice came to be, of course, remains a mystery. It makes sense that he might be noticed among the people of this small city-island, noticed as a stranger, noticed perhaps even as a foreigner—but neither of these things would make word to spread of him of the sort that this woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit would hear and then seek him out as someone who could help. So, how this woman recognized in what she'd heard about this stranger, this foreigner; how she recognized in this word-sketched man something truly powerful is a mystery.

But Mark gives us a clue as to what he thinks: “immediately.” He writes that she “immediately” heard about him and came and bowed down at his feet. And this, as you may remember, is a favorite word in this gospel. Lots of things happen immediately here—immediate as indicating not merely a short, momentary, almost-nothing span of time, but also indicating an occurrence with no apparent cause. An event that is without mediation, without intervening factors, without a middleman; an event that is direct, firsthand: such things are precious few in our technologically mediated existence. Such things, Mark would have us know, are things of the Holy Spirit. When this woman immediately heard about Jesus, Mark likely meant to indicate that this woman sensed, and responded to, some palpable yet intangible presence of God.

I noticed something during those post-partum months of hypersensitivity. I noticed that I could blunt it, I could turn it down, if I considered the possibility that the people who themselves were suffering insufferable circumstances weren't so bothered by it all. After all, they weren't my infant son, thus shucked oyster of sensitivities; and they weren't me, all raging empathy. And perhaps they weren't even like me. Maybe they were tougher, dumber, less tenderly entitled than I. It helps, you know, to consider others in such blunting terms—like those overweight, impoverished, largely Hispanic children. We could easily come up with some epithets to dull the sharp fact that they're people just like us, just like me. And those poor, white, unemployed people whose bodies were scarred with burns and births they can barely remember: how at the ready are names we could call them? Tip of my tongue...

When Jesus likened that suffering girl to a dog, I wonder if he did so in some attempt to protect himself—to protect himself from her suffering, to protect himself from her need. Self-offering, I imagine, is a learned task. Kenosis, that is self-emptying is, in my experience, a discipline, something you need to work at. And Jesus, according to Mark, hadn't had much time, to say nothing of any teaching—not yet, anyway.

So, when Jesus called that woman's daughter a dog, her little daughter a little dog, I wonder if he was yet getting ready, not yet fully ready, and so, when faced with the choice of relying on a likely prejudice against this people who weren't his people so to protect himself—to protect himself for just this one week, for just this one day, away now from the press of the needy crowd, away from the dumb dumbness of the following-along disciples, away from the demons and the sickness and the blindness and the paralysis, away from the Pharisees and the scribes and the mean-spirited provocations that kept coming at him; when faced with the choice to rely on his prejudice so he could just have a break, or to allow in the possibility that for him there was no break, there was no away, there was only here and there was only us and the sphere of his concern was all creation—he chose to protect himself.

You know who didn't, didn't protect herself? This woman.

I don't know if the woman would have known the proverb about having a good name. I don't know whether she would have subscribed to the notion that nothing is more valuable than a good name. I don't know just how insulted, threatened, offended she might have been at being called something nasty, as Jesus did call her—and her daughter. I don't know if she'd have been merely turned off or deeply cut.

There are names you could call me that would just have me walk away pissed, but maybe not before saying something nasty right back. And there are things you could say about me that would really light me up. Word-choice matters. Context matters, as does subtext. Intent matters, as does who's doing the name-calling. There are some things I could easily let go, and there are other things I'd need to work at to let go. Call me a nasty name when I really need your help: that one would be tough for me take in and then overcome.

If what Jesus said and did as regards this woman cut her deeply, then her response of persistence might show him what self-giving love is all about. If what Jesus said and did was deeply shaming to her, then her staying true to her task might teach him all the more what kenosis looks like when lived and play

out. She had a child to save—and no measure of shame and humiliation was going to sway her from that purpose.

Sound familiar? It sounds to me like what Jesus would do on the cross. He had a whole world of God’s children to save, and no amount of shame and humiliation (to say nothing of pain and suffering) was going to sway him from this daunting, vaulted task.

She taught him that. She taught him what that looks like, what taking it looks like so someone else might be saved.

Has she taught us this as well?

As it happens the children of Tyre are still in need of saving. We don’t call them Syrophoenicians anymore. We simply call them Syrians. One of them washed up on a beach in Turkey this week. He wasn’t from Tyre, it’s true. He was from a city a little further north. But he was a child and he was suffering under a demon-possessed politics—ISIS taking hold wherever it can.

I have no idea how to address the refugee crisis that is playing out most pressingly in Southern Europe. It is way beyond my understanding, beyond my sphere of influence. But it is *not* beyond my sphere of concern, *our* sphere of concern. Really, I’m sorry to say, if we’re truly to follow Christ, then nothing ever is beyond our sphere of concern. Christ widens this, much perhaps even to his surprise. Beyond our homes and families, beyond our villages and cities, beyond our race and nation, beyond, beyond.

As it happens, Abdullah Kurdi knows this. That’s the father. That’s the name of the man whose son washed up on that Turkish beach—one of his two young sons who drowned in the Mediterranean. He knows this, said as much to reporters: “I hope this people will be helped, that these massacres are stopped. We are human beings, just like Westerners.”

What then are we to do—we Westerners who are human beings just like them, and who moreover mean to be Christ’s human beings?

Pray.

Open ourselves up to the possibility that we might be of help, and then help when any such possibility presents itself.

Be ready.

Here, then, is spiritual food to sustain us for such readiness. Take, eat; taste, and see that the Lord is good and means for good to abound for us and for all.

Thanks be to God.