

Gospel Lesson: Mark 7:24-30

If you read the chapters of Mark that precede this passage, you find that Jesus and the disciples have been extremely busy healing, teaching, and even providing food for the many people who came to see and hear him. Now in this passage Jesus and his disciples travel northwest toward Tyre, a town on the Mediterranean coast, to the home of a friend. Here Jesus hoped to find some private time for rest, prayer, and renewal.

Tyre was a beach town, a quiet seaside area. In Jesus' day, when the Romans ruled the area, they built a hippodrome there – a horserace track. Tyre was in the province of Syrophenecia, north of the province of Galilee. Tyre is still there; you can look it up on Google Earth. Today it is a bustling seaside resort in the country of Lebanon.

Sermon Theme: “Who Let the Dogs In?”

Prayer: Holy God, may our words, our thoughts, the attitudes of our hearts, and the actions we choose always honor you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago the Boston Globe published some favorite local recipes under the title, “Land of the Bean and the Cod.” That phrase stirred an old memory in me. I put together in my mind a little doggerel that went like this: “Let's raise a glass to Old Boston, land of the bean and the cod, where the Lowell's only talk to the Cabots, and the Cabots talk only with God.”

Where did this verse come from? Some further research turned up this information. At a Holy Cross Alumni Dinner in 1910, John Collins Bossidy offered this toast: “And this is good old Boston, The home of the bean and the cod, Where the Lowell's talk to the Cabots And the Cabots talk only to God.”

Now how did a kid who grew up in Kentucky and Pennsylvania ever hear of this toast, and retain a small part of it in his memory? Perhaps because this little bit of verse carries a powerful stereotype about Boston. It suggests that people in this area like beans and cod, and that there were powerful families who only communicated with each other and with those who expressed their faith in the same way they did. But that is an old outworn stereotype of Boston, right?

Have you ever watched one of those artists at the beach who draws caricatures of people, highlighting and exaggerating some parts of their appearance and yet capturing the essence of their personality? The artist may draw a tangle of spiky hair on a boy's caricature, large beautiful eyes on a young woman, or a certain expression of the mouth on someone else. You look at the caricature and say, “Yes! He got her look!” Cartoonists do the same with public figures. Look at cartoons of President Obama in the paper, and they almost all exaggerate the size of his ears.

Stereotypes are a bit like a cartoon or a caricature. They are a short-hand way to describe a group of people. They are an oversimplified standardized image of a person or a group. Here's a stereotype of the US Government that I heard the other day: “They have an army to blow things up and they give a lot of money to old people.” Now who do you think pictures the US Government like that?

Here's another stereotype; see if you can identify the group: "Youse better keep your yap shut about this, Calzone! Da last guy that messed wit' us, he didn't stay so healthy, know what I mean? I mean we took him on a long ride. Capiche?"

Stereotypes reveal some of our prejudices. They reduce a person to a set of characteristics that may not fit them at all, but they help us define the group. Sometime stereotypes can deeply hurt.

I used to help teach a seminar on racism. One of my favorite exercises was to ask people this question: When you were in high school, which groups of people were you prejudiced against? We would list them on the board: jocks, cheerleaders, mean teachers, cops. Pretty soon someone would add blondes, then black kids, Asian kids, white kids, Amish kids, Hispanics, southerners, Democrats.

At this point I would ask a second question: how do you feel about these groups today? And the people in the seminar would think about that a while. Then they would say things like: "I still don't like mean teachers, but I have known a lot of kind teachers, too." Or "now I work with a Hispanic man and I admire his competence." Or, "now I like blondes." Or, "I admire athletes today; I think in high school I was jealous of their popularity.

The third question in this prejudice exercise was: "If your attitude is different today than it was back then, what has changed?" And people said things like, "I got to know some people from that group." Or, "I grew up." In the case of the blondes, "I married one." With other groups people said, "Life experience, maturity and prayer helped me to change my prejudice."

Stereotypes, caricatures, and prejudices are all shorthand ways of defining others. Often they keep us separated from other people; they protect us from getting too close to other people, from really caring for others. So this brings us to our scripture. What was going on with Jesus when he went to Tyre and encountered the Syrophenician woman?

Jesus and his disciples had been extremely busy teaching and healing and organizing a spiritual movement in the Galilee area. A few days earlier Jesus had recognized their need for rest and renewal. His disciples had come back from their own mission trip, when they had gone throughout the Galilee area to preach, heal and drive out demons. Jesus said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." They got into a boat, rowing east on the Sea of Galilee, but the people saw them going and a huge crowd followed them, walking around the edge of the lake. Jesus had compassion on them and he stopped and taught them, and then, because they were hungry, he fed this crowd of 5000 people by getting them to share God's gifts just as the boy had shared his lunch of loaves and fishes.

So it was some days after this that Jesus decided to leave the province of Galilee for a short while. He and the disciples traveled north along the Mediterranean coast to the town of Tyre, for private time, rest and renewal. He did not want anyone to know he was there. And that is when the Syrophenician woman found him.

She was a desperate mother with a sick child, a child who had an unclean spirit. We would likely say that the child had a mental or emotional illness. This mother had heard about Jesus,

the healer, and although she was from a different country and a different religion her love for this child drove her to come to Jesus and to bow down at his feet. Exhausted and irritated because his private time had ended, Jesus used the most unlikely stereotype in talking with this Gentile woman. Jews often called themselves “the Children of Israel,” or “the Children of God,” but people who were from other countries and religions they called dogs. So Jesus said, “Let the Children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the Children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Instead of allowing this stereotype, this insult, to get under her skin, the woman said to Jesus, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Jesus saw her humble spirit, her determination, her hope and her love for her poor sick daughter, and he said to the woman, “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.” So the woman went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

This conversation between Jesus and the Gentile woman may leave us scratching our heads. What are we to make of the contradiction between Jesus’ harsh words and his caring actions? We know that Jesus called the Pharisees “a brood of vipers,” and that he tossed the greedy businessmen out of the Jerusalem Temple’s outer court. But this woman is just a desperate parent pleading for her child. We would not speak about her using a stereotype and we would certainly not turn her away. Or would we?

Before we answer that question, it would be good to ask ourselves if we would be willing to pay a bit more for our clothing if we knew that those who made our clothes were paid a fair wage and worked in safety. A few days ago I bought a new pair of shorts. The tag said they were made in Bangladesh, north of India. Perhaps they were stitched together by one of those young women who died in that terrible factory fire in May. Do you remember? More than one hundred young women were trapped and died in a fire that spread to the upper floors of a building with no emergency exits.

Would we pay more for our electronic gear if we knew those who manufactured it had decent working conditions and wages? And would we be willing to pay more for other goods and services in this country if the minimum wage was raised to support our own workers and their families?

This question about who we would turn away is a soul question. Do we turn our backs on clothing workers from Bangladesh, electronics assemblers from China, or minimum wage earners in our own country? We know that Jesus calls us to compassionate living, and yet there are so many things that we want. Like Jesus in this story, we get tired and cranky and we say things and do things that do not reflect our best attitudes and behavior.

The Gospel of Mark shows us this Gentile woman as a model of responsible behavior. She came to Jesus as a humble person and bowed at his feet. She knew that she had no right to expect anything from him, but she had hope based on her love for her child. She did not ask anything

for herself; only that her daughter could be healed. She was content to come to Jesus as a dog, asking only for one crumb.

The Syrophoenician woman possessed an insight that many people of faith never understand. She knew that divine grace is a gift from God. It cannot be earned. It is a gift given out of the mercy of God. And to discover that God's grace extends even beyond the boundaries of Israel and Judaism only added to the wonder.

For when Jesus healed this woman's daughter, it was a sign that the Kingdom of God had broken through our human stereotypes and prejudices. No longer is Jesus' mission only to the people of Galilee; it is a mission to all the people of the world. The borders were opened just a bit that day when this child was healed. Even those who were called dogs came under God's blessing.

Within a few years, many Gentiles were becoming a part of this new church of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul was preaching that there is no longer any difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, clean and unclean. The movement of the gospel outward to country after country and from group to group began at that time and continues to this day.

All of us have prejudices, our shorthand personal attitudes toward other people. All of us struggle with stereotypes. Even Jesus had to overcome a prejudice to heal a person in need. If we are wise we will examine our own prejudices and change our attitudes when we find that they are a barrier between us and the people whom God loves.

This sermon, by Pastor Lawrence R. Bergstresser, was preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, MA, on July 14, 2013.