

Humanizing Jesus 14th after Pentecost, Year B
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When my nephew
was 4 or 5 years old,
my sister took him to church one Sunday,
sent him off to Sunday School
and on the way home asked what he had learned that day.
“Mom,” he told her.
“Jesus is SO cool,
he can do anything,
he’s like...
he’s like, a superhero.
Even better than Superman!”
I have a feeling that probably wasn’t the point
the Sunday School teacher was trying to make that day,
but in the mind of a 4 or 5-year-old boy,
there is no better praise than calling someone a superhero.

If we were asked to describe Jesus
we might not use the word superhero
but we might describe someone who is pretty close to a superhero.
Think about how you would describe him –
would you pull information from the stories you know about him:
he welcomes everyone
– no matter where they come from
or how old they are
he feeds the hungry,
he heals people.

Maybe you would describe him by the things he did:
he sought justice in an unjust world
he was a leader,
a teacher,
a rebel,
a preacher.

Or maybe you would use words from a hymn or poem:
do you know that one about the 2 sets of footprints across a beach?
The one where the narrator asks Jesus,
in the moments I was lowest,
there is only one set of footprints.

Why did you abandon me
when I needed you most?

And Jesus says,
I did not abandon you,
it was in those moments that I carried you.

Did you notice what all of these descriptions have in common?
They’re all positive –
they describe a person you might want to spend time with,
someone who is loving and kind,

but who also has good boundaries and is clear about who he is
and what he is doing.
Someone who is
a lot like a superhero.
This is the way many of us
like to think of Jesus –
it's comfortable and familiar,
and it isn't really controversial.
Which is why,
when we come to stories like the one we heard from Mark a few minutes ago,
preachers like me groan:
the story of the Syrophenician woman
does not portray Jesus in a good light.

Jesus has entered the region of Tyre –
this is away from his usual teaching and preaching circuit
and is in Greek, non-Jewish territory,
yet Jesus goes to stay with someone he knows there.
According to Mark,
Jesus wants to keep his presence in Tyre hidden –
maybe Jesus is in need of a well-deserved break
from the crowds of people
who have been following him from place to place.
But it is impossible to keep Jesus hidden -
he arrives at the house where he is going to stay
and almost immediately a woman with a daughter who is sick at home
comes to Jesus and throws herself at his feet,
begging him to heal her daughter.
So far, this story starts like almost any other healing story in the gospels –
Jesus is trying to get away from the crowds
when someone finds him and asks for help,
so we might expect that Jesus will do his usual thing:
heal the child
and send the mother on her way.
Instead, Jesus says to the woman who is on her knees at his feet,
“Let the children eat what they want first,
it's not right to take the children's bread
and throw it to the dogs.”

Wait, what?
That's not what we expect from the Jesus we know and love.
Did he really just call the woman a dog?
Because it sounded like he called her a dog
and even if you accept the theory that this was a common racial slur
between Jewish and Syrophenician people at the time,
we don't expect (or want) Jesus to engage in that kind of language or behaviour.
The woman, who could easily have been intimidated by Jesus' language,
and could justifiably slunk away,
instead stands her ground and says to Jesus,
“Well, even the dogs under the table
eat the crumbs that the children drop.”
Wait, what?

Did she just challenge something Jesus said?
Did a foreign woman actually argue with Jesus?
This is not what we expect or want of Jesus' followers either.

I'm going to hit pause on the story
and ask you to set it aside for a minute or two,
we'll come back to it,
but I want to point something else out before we continue.

When we read this story
the action is very much centred on Jesus and the mother –
the conflict between them,
will Jesus heal the daughter or not?

This is always where I have focused my attention
when I've heard this story –
the verbal word-play between Jesus and the mom.

But this week I started to wonder about the daughter.
You remember the little girl –
the one at home,
sick,
in bed?

Mark doesn't tell us anything about her
other than she had an unclean spirit –
in the 21st century she might have autism,
or ADHD, or some other kind of diagnosis;
in the ancient middle east she had an unclean spirit
and that meant she was an outcast.

Being a girl
she already had a very low status –
from her family's perspective she would be nothing but a drain
on their finances until she was old enough to marry off to someone else,
but being ill meant she was irredeemable.

Thinking about this girl,
I began to wonder –
did she know or understand what was happening?

Locked in an illness of the mind and/or body
the way she was
did she feel trapped?

Did she believe that no one could or would help her?
Was she aware of the absence of her mother's
familiar presence
and did she feel helpless, alone,
maybe even abandoned?

It's not hard to imagine
that she thought no one was doing anything to help her.

It's not hard to imagine feeling abandoned –
especially if you have experienced it yourself,
but even if you haven't
we hear stories about people feeling lost and alone
in our own world
over and over again in our news feeds:
the Taliban takes over Afghanistan

and the desperation of the people trying to leave is shocking
we see pictures of people jammed into the last airplanes
leaving the country
and hear stories of young boys hiding in the wheel wells of trucks
to get across the border.
Covid case numbers rise exponentially in Saskatchewan,
we hear stories of young people and children being sick around the globe
and the response of the provincial government
seems to focus on the need for individual freedom
rather than care for everyone.

On Wednesday when students across Saskatchewan returned to their classrooms
with a patchwork of safety measures implemented by local school boards,
CBC radio ran a story about a mom whose children in Ontario
were going to school where mask use
was optional.

“Our girls wear masks everywhere they go,” the mom said.
She explained that they had talked to their daughters
about why they were wearing masks
and told the girls it wasn’t just about not getting sick,
it’s also about not making other people sick.
The story included a recording of one of the girls saying,
“I can’t get vaccinated,
so I wear a mask and wash my hands
but I don’t understand why the adults can’t make everyone wear masks.
Why don’t they care enough to try to make it as safe as possible
for me to go to school?”

Maybe the girl in the story from Mark
was wondering something similar –
why doesn’t someone care enough to help me?
And maybe the idea that her daughter might think that
is what drove the mother
to leave her house without her husband,
to kneel at the feet of a stranger,
and not give up when he first said no.

“It’s not right to take the children’s bread
and throw it to the dogs,” Jesus told her.
“Even the dogs under the table
eat the crumbs that the children drop,”
the mother replied.
Mark doesn’t tell us how Jesus felt
when the mother said this to him –
did he laugh at her quick wit?
Did he experience a moment of stunned silence
because a foreign woman challenged him?
The only thing Mark tells us that Jesus told her,
“Well said!
Go home,
your daughter has been made well.”

In healing the girl,
Jesus restored her to her family,
he reconnected her to her community,
he considered more than his own exhaustion
and desire for quiet,
and released the love of God into the world once again.
And the little girl,
who was so far away from Jesus,
feeling lost and alone,
not understanding or knowing what was happening
in that house in Tyre
was embraced by the healing power of God's Spirit.

This is one of the gifts of this uncomfortable story –
even though Jesus acts in a way we don't want him to act,
he also acts in the way we do expect him to act:
with compassion and love.
And in this act he reminds us
that we don't have to be part of the "in" crowd
to be embraced by God's love.
We don't even have to do anything in particular
to receive compassion from God:
when we are unable ask for it ourselves,
someone else may be asking for us.

My Facebook feed this week
was full of pictures of the first day of school
and, like me, several of my friends
have children leaving home and going to university
in a different city.
My youngest son started at university in California
about 3 weeks ago and it's been tough.
He's homesick
and overwhelmed enough that he actually admits it to me and his dad.
As a mom,
I understand the desperation of the Syrophenician woman
to find healing for her daughter,
because I just want to go to my son's school
and make everything better for him,
but that isn't really an option.
So I hear this story of the Syrophenician woman
and I pray for my son,
and I pray for all the kids who have gone off to a new city to start university this year
after almost 2 years of high school from home.
And I pray for all the parents with children who are returning to classrooms
this fall,
who are uncertain about the safety and wisdom of this plan.
And I pray for the people of Afghanistan
who are terrified and afraid,
who feel abandoned and alone.
And I pray for the healthcare workers

who are so tired and worried.
And I trust
that in Jesus,
God will reach out to them
with the promise and assurance
that no matter what it feels like
they are deeply loved
and they are not alone.

