

"Dogs and Family"

Mark 7:27-34

Barb and I had a wonderful little encounter the other day. We had to go shopping and as we approached the car Barb said "Do you want me to drive or do you want to drive?" Now we have a history of both wanting to drive and it is a little competition between us. So I said, half in jest "Well it depends on which seat you want to drive from?" Because you see, Barb is a terrible back seat driver. "Just for that" she said, "I am going to drive". She started the car and began to back up and I yelled, "Wait, there is a car coming". And I looked at her and she looked at me and I was the one who began to laugh first. It was a moment of transformation - a turning point so to speak - a time I realized I was as bad a back seat driver as she. And we both laughed.

The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Thomas Merton

Whatever this strange passage is in Mark's gospel, commentators agree that it is a turning point, a transformation. It appears to be about community - about family even - who is included who is not. It's about insiders and outsiders and the way insiders treat outsiders. It's about salvation.

It's a strange story - rather shocking to our ears for there is no way around it - Jesus calls a woman and her child "dogs." It was a cruel thing to say both in Jesus' time and in our time today. It's a derogatory term - a term of objectifying the other - seeing the other as less than human; less than self.

There were very human people travelling with Jesus as he left the familiar territory and went into the land of the Gentiles. Perhaps in this story Jesus had a very human moment. He was surrounded by people who would have cheered and laughed at his words when he called the woman and her child dogs. Maybe he just forgot who he was for a moment and became like the rest of the people all around. That's how some commentators explain these terrible words from Jesus lips.

Other commentators say it is important to realize that Jesus is now in a foreign country - gone are the normal antagonists of the story - the scribes

and Pharisees who always ridicule or get angry at Jesus statements - he is far too liberal for them - he eats with tax collectors and sinners, makes friends with prostitutes and lepers and takes times to be with women and children.

Without these antagonists present, commentators argue, Mark the gospel writer, needed to have an antagonist and so in the story he made Jesus both the antagonist and the protagonist. It is just part of the story form. Yet other commentators say Jesus called the woman and her child dogs by looking straight at her, but with a twinkle in his eye - a twinkle she alone recognized giving her the courage to respond to him with the powerful words "but even dogs are given the scraps after the meal". These commentators suggest that for a woman to have responded to Jesus after such a colossal racial slur would have taken tremendous strength - strength given to her by Jesus when she saw the twinkle in his eye.

Feel free to choose which ever one works best for you - Jesus having a bad day, a human day, Jesus being both the antagonist and protagonist in the story because that's what the writer Mark needed, or Jesus saying it all with a twinkle in his eye.

It is what happens next that is even more shocking

In effect by his words and actions in healing the woman's daughter, Jesus said something like this:
dogs are part of the family either we are all dogs or there are no dogs only humans beautiful creations of God flawed but loved sinful but forgiven screwed up but not beyond redemption. Why because we all belong to God - all of us!

That's the moment of transformation in the gospel of Mark and you would have been able to hear a pin drop at the same time that all the disciples jaws dropped to the floor.

It would have be astounding. A moment of salvation.

And who is being saved? - everyone who experienced that transformation - both the insiders and the outsiders. And you and I experience it as well.

It was stories of Jesus like these that the apostle Paul would later be inspired to write - "in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek male nor female ..."

It is so hard to follow Jesus' seemingly simple call to love "the other", whoever the "other" is in our lives. It is so hard to allow Jesus to transform us.

I invite you to form a fist and hold it tightly. Feel the intensity, the inability for air to enter - no room - no room for others - bring to mind the times you have had no room for others - you are human - now open your fist, one finger at a time - who are you called to love - are you called to love everyone? Does opening your fist to love God give room to love others? Look at your open hand. Feel it! Feel the coolness of the air on it? What does your open hand say to you? What does God say to you?

Fred Rogers was a long time favourite children's tv show personality - Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian Minister within the Presbyterian church in Canada. Here is one of his quotes:

"I believe that appreciation is a holy thing - that when we look for what's best in a person we happen to be with at the moment, we are doing what God does all the time. So in loving and appreciating our neighbour we are participating in something sacred"

That's what Jesus was doing as he saw beauty in the Syrochrean woman - he saw her as God saw her and transformation happened.

Today, right now, people around the world are called to see Syrians like that. Refugees from Syria are in need of a world that is transformed - of people who have been transformed. They are in need of people who see others the way God sees us all.

As Christians we are called to lead. As Christians we cannot turn away refugees - as Christians borders are broken down and barriers are removed. That's the story of Jesus for today. And we - you and I - are called to live that story out. But first we need to claim it, yes claim it, see it, experience it - here and now in our own lives, in our own words and be able to express it.

What are your stories of transformation?

Several years ago I attended an event at the University of Guelph jointly organized by all the Christian organizations on campus. At the end of the day we had a worship service in which students came forward with their cardboard testimonies. They reflected turning points in peoples lives - change that was treasured and remembered. These were deeply spiritual moments that the students wanted to share - moments of transformation, moments of salvation.

I have two to share with you today. On the one side of this piece of cardboard I have written the words, "grief, sadness, confusion". On the other side I have written "appreciation, connectedness, beloved". It is the story of transformation in my life around the story of my brother's death at 34.

The second piece of cardboard has the words "frustrated, hurt, angry, disappointed" and on the other side "the experience of peace through prayer". It is the story of transformation in my life when dealing with a colleague.

What are your stories of transformation? In order to have the courage to act out that transformation in our lives we need to know our own stories and tell our own stories. Stories of God's transformation in our lives are gifts. Gifts to be shared. Gifts to be used.

I invite you to write out your cardboard testimonies and bring them next week.

Thanks be to God