

Jesus Confronted By A Hard Truth
Mark 7:24-37, James 2:1-17
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Woodbury UMC
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When I pray, you may have noticed that I often pray to Holy Spirit, or Spirit of Creation, or some other word than God. I do this for several reasons, and they all come down to the fact that words matter. If I always address my prayers to father God, for instance, I may reinforce your idea that God is male, or even a white man with a long beard sitting on a cloud. That's not my conception of God, and so my hope is that in addressing prayers differently, that even a little bit our collective conception of God might be broadened.

That brief word choice took a little explaining. Words have meaning, and some are really heavy. So it is important to take that into consideration, and to address it, and to account for it. If words are super heavy with meaning, then you zero in on the words, likely to the point of all else being blown away. I gave a sermon a few years ago, and we had a family with a young child that day, and so one person left the sanctuary so that she could take care of that child while everyone else stayed in worship. We had speakers set up so that people in the sanctuary hall could hear the sermon, but of course that doesn't really work, you hear bits and pieces at best.

This person approached me afterwards, with some stern words about that sermon, cautioning me that while SHE didn't have a problem or issue, she warned me that this was a church where some people were of a bent and disposition that they would feel excluded, or even attacked—and all of this was because while she really didn't hear or understand my sermon, this was about three years ago, she heard one word of it that really set her off. (That word was “Kavanaugh.”)

That said, I am going to attempt to offer you this sermon, and to not use the words that it cries out for, in hopes that you can hear what I am saying, and that those words do not make it so that you just hear those two or three words and nothing else that I have to say. Those words are similar, and they both have to do with culture, meaning the values of the society. It does not mean that we all agree on these values, but simply that those values are how a place and time understand things to be.

That is nothing unusual. All human societies are organized around a few values or beliefs, and that usually includes who has power and who gets a say in how things are run. In a caste system, you are born into a social strata, and you can't leave it. In our structure, you can move up, but you are in a real way forever part of where you came from, in the same way you can move down, but still retain the privilege that came from being born among those at the top.

I believe we are all Americans here, and please let me know if I am wrong about that—but as Americans, living in the United States, we are living in a place that has a cultural identity. It was written into law about 250 years ago, based on practices that had been going on for about 500 years. White men with land and money ran things and were the only ones with legal rights, and

when we formed these colonies into a nation, we wrote this into our founding documents so that everything was in service to that value. Lots has changed since then, but what has changed has had that reality as its initial base line.

And then we get to the scriptures we heard read today, written in the middle east about 2000 years ago. They were written by people we call Israelites, or Hebrews—these days we use these terms somewhat synonymously, meaning those people who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were understood to be God’s chosen people, living in a land that God had promised to them in an ancient covenant. You didn’t really have what we would call atheists back in that time. As we read the Gospels, one common refrain is that the Messiah is understood to be the one to kick out the Romans and to restore the nation of Israel. I mention this to emphasize that the people understood themselves to be God’s chosen people, with the entire nation and society organized around that principle. You were either one of God’s chosen, or you were an outsider.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus has an interaction with a woman—described as "a Greek, a Syrophenician by race" (Mark 7:26), and again as "a Canaanitish woman" (Matthew 15:22). This seems to mean that she was of Canaanite descent, a native of the Phoenician seaboard, from the borders of Tyre and Sidon, and Greek in religion. Remember Moses, leading people around the desert, finally bringing them to the land God had picked out for them, the land of Canaan? This woman was descended from those cultures that God’s chosen people had found occupying the land, and had taken by force, as blessed and commanded by God. Jesus is the chosen one among the chosen people — while she is a woman, and an outsider. She approaches him with a desperate concern for her daughter, and so we arrive at today’s scripture.

Jesus not only denies her, but he does it in a pretty cruel way, saying that what belongs to the children ought not be given to dogs. In mideast culture, referring to people as dogs is pretty rough language. We don’t have what we moderns would recognize as swear words in our scripture, but this gets pretty close.

I am spending so much time on this because we who revere Jesus as God incarnate have always insisted that this incarnation was real, and that he was indeed a real human man, born into human culture, born into a set of culture expectations about who God had chosen, and who God did not. Let me be more plain — Jesus reacted harshly to a person begging him for help, and he did it because of her race. Am I saying that Jesus treated people differently because of their race? The scripture would indicate that yes, he did. And then what?

The woman pushed Jesus into realizing that his own teaching, and his saving love, was for all people, not just the Jews. She called Jesus to an expanded ministry, with people who were once strangers, even enemies. The story warns us against insularity, about caring for our own at the expense of caring for the outsider.

What am I getting at?

Well, Jesus is our perfect model. And he treated someone as less than, because of her race. And she called him on it. And he was surprised, and he changed his behavior. All throughout the

Gospels, people engage Jesus in a battle of wits, and Jesus always wins—but not here. The victor is a woman, and an outsider. As in Jesus' day, we live in a time and place where certain people are privileged just because of who they are, and when our social structures make assumptions about people based on their race — or gender, or religion, or all manner of criteria humans have long used to exclude others in order to aggrandize themselves. Apparently, that included Jesus. And when Jesus was called on it, he changed.

I realize this is a hard lesson for many people. It has been shocking to people I've told about this sermon, so shocking that I'm not using those words we have for people who make assumptions about others based on their race. Some may say wait a minute, pastor, there is no way you could know what was in Jesus's heart. And that is true, I don't know what was in Jesus's heart. All we are told is what he said and what he did.

What do we do with that? I look to the passage we heard read from James. James writes in order to encourage his readers to live consistently with what they have learned in Christ. He wants his readers to mature in their faith in Christ by living what they say they believe.

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?
Can faith save you?
If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,
and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do
not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?
So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

If you would consider all people worthy, but treat some as less than worthy, perhaps that worthiness in which you esteem them is dead.

Perhaps if in your heart you hold that structures designed to help people based on race are unjust, but your works don't give any evidence to back that up—James says you might as well not even bother.

There's more — James has some things to say about economics:

*For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in,
and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet,"
have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?*

I cannot tell you how many times I have heard people caution about what to preach and teach in church, to be sure you do or say nothing to offend the big givers. I have heard this from numerous congregants, and I have heard this from an uncomfortable number of clergy.

James continues:

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?

These are hard words. He wrote to a society that gave tremendous privilege to a few at the expense of the many, and as we read these words, it is the same for us. We may have private thoughts about it, and we may believe keeping those thoughts private is a good thing. Thing is, changing hearts and minds does not change the world. Putting those good thoughts into action, no matter how tentatively? THAT changes the world.

What else changes the world? Getting to know those unlike us. Dialogue with those unlike us. When called on his harsh and cruel words, Jesus ended up in dialogue with this woman, and he was changed as a result. With Jesus as our perfect model, we realize that we may have difficulty accepting some people in general and those with different values from our own in particular. But in dialogue, we have an opportunity to discover common humanity and shared values we might not have appreciated. The unnamed woman said Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs—and his response was to say You are Right! Harsh words, met with dialogue, resulting in a changed heart, and that changed heart resulting in actions being taken to alleviate suffering and real, meaningful human connection.

I'll leave you with one final thought. The Gospel goes on to relay the story of Jesus healing a man who could not hear and could not speak clearly. Scripture tells us that Jesus says "Be Opened!" Open Up!—these words are reminiscent of our United Methodist slogan of "Open hearts, open minds, open doors." One commentary I read suggests the "opens" as verbs, not adjectives. Instead of the slogan being a description, I see it as what we are called as a church to do—to go out and open hearts, open minds, and open doors. Jesus had his mind opened, and it changed the course of his ministry. We who form community in his name would do well to allow for our own hearts and minds to be opened, and to see that we are barring none from God's grace and love. That is a good place to end.

I will end with a brief prayer for illumination — we typically offer this before we turn to scripture, in hopes of better understanding, but I offer it here in hopes that it spurs us to live out our values:

Holy Spirit, open our hearts to the story of your love, open our minds to new ways of knowing you, open our doors to all whom you would welcome. Amen.