

Sermon: September 5, 2021

“Like a Wrecking Ball”

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Scripture: Isaiah 35:4-7a, Mark 7:24-37

As a pastor, it should come as no surprise, really, that I love the gospels. I love each of them for different reasons, of course. I have a heart for John who began by telling us that Jesus is the Word and toward the end emphasizes Mary Magdalene as the apostle to the apostles. I love the way Matthew communicates the Sermon on the Mount. Luke’s birth narrative remains my favorite.

And then there’s Mark. Mark is the shortest of the gospels. Mark wastes no time on the birth narrative and does not linger after Jesus’s resurrection. Most scholars agree that Mark was likely a source for Matthew and Luke, hence there’s no embellishment. Mark presents us with the barest bones of the Jesus story, principally focused on his ministry. Mark’s Jesus is on the move. This is what I love about it, actually, that there’s an urgency to Jesus’s actions—because there would have had to be, wouldn’t there? His ministry is a mere 3 out of his 33 years. Sometimes we forget this. We forget that Jesus’s human life was only 33 years. We like to pick apart those who are young, particularly in ministry. As a young-ish minister myself, I have been criticized as not having enough life experience. I politely beg to differ, but I also remind folks that all of the apostles would have been young when they engaged in their ministry. They followed Jesus a scant 3 years before the crucifixion and Jesus, himself, was nothing if not a young man as he traveled throughout the ancient world teaching and preaching.

But I digress.

The gospel called Mark gives us this image of Jesus of Nazareth and the disciples that reminds us that he's moving quickly. Mark uses the word "immediately" a lot. He really likes that word. So much so, that he uses it 41 times. For such a short book, that's a whole lot of immediatels. Mark wants us to know Jesus is not wasting any time here. He comes into this region like a wrecking ball (I'll leave out the Miley Cyrus sing-a-long, I promise). But he does, Jesus comes in like a wrecking ball to the customs and principles that so many Jews and Romans held dear. He's going to take that wrecking ball and defy the religious elite, upturn people's understanding of the kingdom of God and who God favors, and change the world through his death and resurrection—which, spoiler alert, powerful people aren't all that happy about. Mark wants to illustrate here that this Jesus guy is on a mission and he will fulfill it, come what may. But even a man on a mission needs a break. And that's what Jesus is attempting to do in Tyre when he is confronted by the Syrophoenician woman, who, the text tells us, "immediately heard about him."

I think this is at least part of the reason that he responds to her the way he does. There are many theories about why he compares her to a dog, some of which chalk it up to Jesus's humanity. Others who try to parse the language in a way that suggests that, while he was rejecting her, his words were a bit more playful than the text reads. Perhaps that's true. But to modern ears, and apparently to the ears of this woman, Jesus's words stand as a rejection. As a modern woman and as a lesbian who has been an outcast in many circles, it's hard to read this passage with gracious eyes.

It's striking, the way Jesus responds, but we'd be fools to focus entirely on this aspect of the text because equally striking is the way the woman answers and Jesus's eventual reaction. Her words catch him off guard. This is a woman unafraid of challenge and confrontation. She is, like many mothers, fiercely protective of her child. Desperate for her child to be well, she's not going to take no for an answer, but instead will push back at Jesus's rejection in a way that apparently impresses him. This gentile, this WOMAN, is clearly a woman who believes Jesus has the power to help her daughter, and by gum, she's going to get him to help. And help is exactly what she gets. Immediately.

We never do find out if Jesus gets that rest he needs because the very next verse tells us that Jesus is returning from Tyre, toward the Sea of Galilee and down in the region of the Decapolis (which we discussed a little while back as being a collection of Hellenistic, or Greek, cities in Syria). There, he is brought a deaf man who couldn't speak properly in order that Jesus might heal him. Interestingly, both of the healings we read about today happen in private—the girl is healed out of sight of her mother or the public and here, Jesus draws away with the man to heal him. We know that Jesus does, indeed, sometimes make public displays, but Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay reminds us that these are two stories displaying “private confrontations made with individual people who stand in for their communities as they are affirmed, humanized, and restored.”

Affirmed by Jesus's willingness to engage and acknowledge that there is suffering here. Jesus is willing to see the Syrophonecian woman, even though it takes him a beat affirming, that he sees the need she has and will intervene. Then, though he is exhausted and surrounded by people, he

engages with and sees the deaf man's distress and struggle. Jesus affirms the urgency of their concerns and in so doing, he humanizes them.

Jesus does not see complaints before him or disabilities, but people, beloved children of God every bit as deserving of healing as any other person he might encounter. These are not people who would have been seen as fully human, with the same rights as men from Jesus's community. They were outsiders. Women. Children. Disabled. They would have been seen as less than, but Jesus's engagement with them changes that. Not only does it change them, it changes how they are seen and accepted as actual members of humankind and full members of the community. This is Jesus widening the circle. Telling us humanity is made of more than able-bodied males from the right side of the tracks.

Lastly, Jesus restored these people. Not just to physical wholeness from the infirmities of the little girl possessed of demons or the deaf man, but also, as suggested, wholeness as part of the community. Part of the family of people. The beloved family of God. It changes who we think of as being part of our kin-dom if everyone is affirmed, humanized, and restored. It changes who is part of "us" if we see someone different than we are and instead of immediately recoiling because of difference, we affirm humanity and God-likeness.

Jesus may come in like a wrecking ball to many of the religious norms that hold us back from fully being the community God calls us to be, but the wrecking ball serves a restorative purpose. It's not like the wrecking ball that merely destroys, but the one that tears down walls with specific purpose. A mission that goes beyond demolition to wholeness, healing, community building, and the restoration of the kin-dom of God. Seen in this

way, stories like these two from our gospels, stories of urgency in how we see and respond to others, should propel us to see the urgency of the call to love and care for others and answer it in kind. What if we moved with the speed of Mark's Jesus? What if our lives had that urgency? What if all the issues of suffering and injustice were addressed as the emergencies they are? What if we placed an "immediately" on our call to love?

Immediately affirming.

Immediately humanizing.

Immediately restoring.

What kind of church would we have then? What kind of *world* would we have then? Then the question is less about the if and when, but the how. In other words, how can we, the church, take part in it? Think about it. Amen.