

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Sometime recently I made an offhand reference in something I wrote about the idea of having God as your copilot. I don't remember if that was in a sermon or a newsletter article, or something else. Anyway, I was referencing a book that I've never read, but that was on the shelf in our house when I was younger. It was written in 1943 and inspired a 1945 movie that is now considered a classic of World War II aviation. But really, all I was concerned about in bringing it up was the title and what it implies. "God is my co-pilot" means "I'm the pilot, and God is there to help me out, and back me up. The flight plan is mine, God is just there to help me to get where I'm going." I think that summarizes a tendency we all have in our relationship with God, to make God fit into *our* story, either to bless things as we have arranged them when we are among the fortunate, or to change them in our favor when we are not. An illustration of the latter is the story of the classic Arabic folktale, Aladin, which Disney made into an animated feature when our kids were young. The poor street urchin Aladin finds a magic lamp with a Genie and uses his wishes to win the heart of princess Jasmine and live happily ever after. The idea is the same. We imagine ourselves as the star of the show, and God as the one who makes things turn out right for us.

What's missing from these approaches is any notion that what we most want and dream and imagine for the good life we desire might not actually be good for us or for the world around us. And of course it deprives God of being God, of being our author, our critic, and our savior. But we are not alone in having this problem. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is continually working to move his disciples from their notions of how the world ought to work to how God is challenging and changing the world into something radically better. That will be particularly noticeable when we get to next week's texts, but in a more subtle and arguably more profound way, it is already happen in this remarkable text we get today.

Jesus in this text is trying to go on vacation. In fact he's going abroad, out of the territory of his own people to coastal Syria; Phoenician territory. He's trying to get away from the crowds because, from clues in the text, he needs a break. He needs some time off from all of the healing and feeding, and from the teaching and the arguing. But even here he can't catch a break and is approached by a local woman. Is that why he seems a bit grumpy in his first reaction to her? Can we dare to think about Jesus as anything other than well kempt and well mannered, with a kind and gentle smile and a slightly ethereal glow about him? Well, the question of how we relate to Biblical texts is connected to the question of how we relate to God. Do we come to the Bible with our own agenda and assumptions and make our reading fit them, or do we allow the text to confront and challenge us? Maybe we should ask, "what would Jesus do?" But not what we *imagine* Jesus would do, but what Jesus *actually* does do in the text before us. And what he *actually* does here is rather rude. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he says. In other words, you are not one of the children of Israel. You and your daughter are dogs. You are not worthy of my time or healing." Is there any other way to read that? Is Jesus maybe "testing her faith" as the bulletin intro this morning suggest might be a way to get Jesus off the hook here? But why would he expect this foreign woman to have *any* faith at all, in him or the God of Israel? He came here precisely to escape notice.

The woman's response is surprising. It is surprising to the reader of Mark's Gospel, but it is also surprising to Jesus. And this is a dynamic of this Gospel. The people you expect to have

faith, those children of Israel, don't have it, and the people you don't expect to have it, do. But this story actually doesn't mention faith at all. I'm not saying it's not here, but I suspect that this was more an act of desperation on the woman's part after she had tried everything else. Whatever it is, it is remarkable. She does not react the way you or I would react to such a put-down. Or maybe you'd handle it better than I would. She takes the insult for the sake of her daughter. She does not defend her honor. She accepts Jesus' terms. "Fine, we are dogs. May we please have a few crumbs from the children's table? Please!"

Then the miracle happens... You're thinking of the daughter being healed, right? That's the second miracle. The first miracle is that Jesus does not react in the expected way, especially in this culture. He has just lost the argument. But it's worse. He is a respected teacher and rising celebrity, and he has just been bested by a *woman*! And a *foreign* woman at that! The humiliation in this culture cannot be overstated. For Jesus not to respond with indignation and outrage, for him not to stick to his Israel-first talking points and come back with an even more clever and devastating retort is astonishing. Yes, miraculous! Jesus was wrong, and he backed down. No way he could get elected in our current political climate. That's flip-flopping. If he changes his mind about this, what else might he change his mind about?

I have been making the case for years now that this story of the Syrophonecian woman is a prefiguring of the crucifixion. Jesus bears the sins of his people into this encounter and is figuratively nailed. But like a sheep led to the slaughter, he does not open his mouth, to borrow the quote from Isaiah used to talk about Jesus's death. When God called Abraham and Sarah back at the start of Israel's story, God promised to bless them. But not *only* them. God also promised to bless all the nations of the earth *through* them. Israel loved the first part of that deal, but tended to ignore the second part. It's a very human thing to do, to resist sharing our blessings, and Jesus in Mark's Gospel, maybe more than any other Gospel, is fully incarnate in our humanity. Jesus takes on our nature and our lot, assumes our arrogance, our pride, our selfishness and disregard for our fellow human beings, together with all of our other sinfulness, and takes it to the cross to be killed. This story, then, of Jesus and the foreign woman, is a mini crucifixion.

What I have come to appreciate recently about this text, though, is how this woman fills out the picture of the crucifixion and models the love of God that is behind it. Her sole concern is for her daughter, and she will suffer anything to free her from her helpless condition. It's almost like this encounter is God's reminder to Jesus of their mission: "this is what we came to do, to save our children at all cost."

And so Jesus flip-flops, for us and for our salvation. He will not allow God's agenda to be eclipsed by ours, and will not abandon us to our poor piloting or misguided wishes. He instead takes on the consequences of our doomed human condition in order to open for us different future, a future that redirects our hearts toward compassion and mercy, not just for our own tribe but for all people, as God has intended all along.

May our ears and hearts be opened by this gracious good news. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.