

### “Border Folly”

The gospel reading this week is deceptively simple. We have two stories about Jesus healing people—a daughter with a demon and a man with a speech impediment. Yet, despite the simplicity of the narrative, with a little close reading we can see that these stories are anything but simple. Additionally, I contend that without these two stories you and I might not be Christians, and Christianity may have ended up as another small subset of Judaism. Instead it is a religious movement of nearly eight billion people worldwide, of which about eighty-five million are part of the Anglican Communion. But I am getting ahead of myself.

The first of the two healing stories takes place in the region of Tyre. This might seem like a minor element, except that it tells us that Jesus has left Galilee and gone to a Gentile land. I think he leaves Galilee to get some rest because as we saw in last week’s reading he was besieged by people seeking miracles from him or curiously waiting to see a miracle performed. Also, as we saw earlier in this chapter the religious hierarchy is targeting him and his disciples for great scrutiny. By leaving Galilee and going north he thinks he can get some relief from his fans and his antagonists.

But as Mark tells us time and again word about Jesus is not to be squelched. No sooner does he get to Tyre and goes into a house than a local woman comes begging for a miracle. Up until now Jesus has been dealing with other Jews. This woman is identified as a “Greek of Syrophenician origin.” In this context Greek means not that she is from Greece but that she is not a Jew; she is a Gentile. Greek was the catchall term for non-Jews. Syrophenician means she was born and lives in an area of Syria close to the sea. While Jesus is the actual foreigner, for the purpose of the story the woman is the outsider.

Jesus let’s her know this when she asks for healing for her daughter. He responds, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Well, so much for sweet, loving Jesus. This is some of the harshest language in the scriptures. Jesus just called this woman, her daughter and indeed all Gentiles dogs. While some of you may love your dogs, in ancient Palestine they were not pets. They were scavengers and a way of getting rid of garbage. Jesus is saying that the food, in this instance the Good News of God and the healing that Jesus is doing, is only meant for Jews. Most people would have been so overwhelmed by this put down that they would have slinked away. But this woman, bests Jesus by reminding him that dogs get crumbs from the children’s table. This woman seems to open Jesus’ eyes to the possibility of ministry to those other than his fellow Jews.

Indeed, after this encounter with the Syrophenician woman Jesus does not go back to Galilee, instead he goes to the other side of the Sea of Galilee to an area called the Decapolis—the ten cities. This is another Gentile area. Here he encounters a deaf man with a speech impediment. Jesus takes him aside

“puts his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.” He looks to heaven and says in Aramaic “Ephphatha” which translates to “Be opened.”

Once the crowd sees that the man is healed Jesus asks them not to share the story, but of course they do. Once again, Mark is telling us that the work of Jesus cannot be hidden. What’s more, the crowd says, “He has done everything well.” Unlike the Pharisees and scribes who challenged Jesus in Galilee looking to discredit him, this group of Gentiles thinks that Jesus is good.

Jesus’ experiment of taking his message and healing powers to the Gentiles has worked out quite well. Jesus, who in the Gospel of Mark, seems to be learning how to be the Messiah, the Christ, as he matures in his ministry has learned that his message is not exclusive to one group of people. It may be that the message is initially for the Jews but it will also include Gentiles. As St. Paul writes in Romans, “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

These two seemingly simple healing stories open up a new world in Jesus’ ministry. These two stories will help stoke the fires in people like St. Paul who will make it their mission to convert pagans to follow Jesus. The early church expands from being a Jewish sect to a broader community of believers that goes far beyond Judaism and Palestine.

What we see in these two stories are border and boundaries being crossed. There are physical boundaries between Galilee and Syria, and the Decapolis. There are religious boundaries crossed between Jews and Gentiles. There are social boundaries crossed between men and women, and between upper classes (the woman) and lower classes (Jesus). The world is full of such boundaries many of which do not realize exist.

What boundaries are present in our town, our lives, perhaps even our church? Think about what boundaries exist that might make you respond as initially Jesus responded to the Syrophenician woman. When might we find ourselves saying to someone that what we have to offer is not for their kind of people? Are there people we might welcome into church, but not welcome into our homes? How would we feel if an Afghan family who fled from the Taliban was resettled here? Borders and boundaries might give us a sense of security or order. They also impede. Ask those who ride horses cross country, what would happen if all borders were impenetrable.

We must be open enough to know when the borders need to be crossed. We must be able to call out as Jesus did, “Be opened” Ephphatha when borders inhibit compassion. We have to recognize when compassion is the greater gift and that boundaries and borders can be fatal. Borders and boundaries are not just one sided. They injure and kill in both directions. Jesus recognized that. May we follow in his footsteps when we are confronted with the cries for compassion. May we be opened, too.