



“Changing Course”
Scripture – Mark 7:24-37
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 9, 2018

How do you picture Jesus? If your image of Jesus is that he was free of prejudice and guile, more Godlike than human, you probably do not appreciate today’s gospel lectionary reading. I think we should admit it. The behavior of Jesus is embarrassing.

To put our passage in context, fellow Jews have been arguing with Jesus over purity laws. They contend that there are actions that make you holy and pure, and there are actions that make you unholy and impure. Jesus exposes their hypocrisy by pointing out that they follow scrupulous rituals to appear holy, but the way they treat some people is distinctly unholy. After the encounter, Jesus pulls his disciples aside to explain that superficial actions will not put you in harmony with the ways of God. What God cares about is how you treat others.

To underscore the wider implications of his teaching, our text says that Jesus treks to a new location – the region of Tyre, which is next to the Mediterranean Sea and is present day Lebanon. The first century audience understood the implication immediately. Jesus went to the area where Jewish and Gentile boundaries intermingle. New Testament scholar, Warren Carter says this “is a place of tension and prejudice” and the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that the people of Tyre “are our greatest enemies.”¹

Soon after Jesus and his followers arrive in this contentious region, a Gentile woman steps across the boundary and confronts him. The scene is filled with tension because she is a Gentile – a foreigner – an enemy. Somehow word has reached her that Jesus has special healing powers and she is desperate. She drops to her knees and begs, “Lord, help me. My daughter is tormented by a demon.” If this episode followed the typical storyline Jesus would say something compassionate and heal the girl. But this story is unlike any other story in the gospels. After this Gentile woman begs Jesus to heal her daughter, he says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” What sounds a bit opaque to us, was clear to the first century audience. Jesus is saying, “My mission is to Jews, not Gentiles.” And regrettably, he refers to the Gentiles as dogs.

Back in my seminary days – okay, way, way back! – I took several pastoral counseling courses. I wanted to enrich my understanding of people and develop strategies for helping them. I wanted to gain insights into what prompts people to do the things they do, to discover ways to help them see their blind spots, and to make them aware of self-destructive behavior. I was eager to learn tactics for confronting people *gracefully* with things they might not want to hear, but need to face.

In a couple of my courses, I recorded my counseling sessions so that I could later play them for my supervisor and receive feedback. It was an exercise in great humility to have my grave mistakes pointed out.

Fortunately I earned a passing grade. However, after reading today's text, it struck me that if Jesus had been in the course and revealed to his supervisor the exchange he had with this woman, he may have washed out of the program. Calling a woman a "dog?" Ouch!

Yet, this incident also supports the authenticity of the gospels. The writer does not sanitize the story to insure that Jesus is always shown in brilliant radiance. The writer more or less says, "Jesus was unduly harsh with a woman from another tribe, and she not only called him on it, but she was the spark that set off a vital transformation in Jesus. This was the moment when his mission was expanded from *Jews only* to everyone."

To underscore this point, Jesus leaves that region and heads to a town that is east of the Sea of Galilee in present day Jordan. It, too, is Gentile territory. When he arrives, people bring to him a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. This time, there is no hesitation in Jesus. He immediately erases the boundary lines between himself and the man by healing him.

The point is clear. We are to have compassion for anyone who is hurting – not simply those who are part of our particular group.

Racism is shredding the fabric of our society. Do we – as followers of Jesus – have the courage and the will to erase boundary lines that segregate us from others and perpetuate injustices? The Reverend Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners Magazine* puts a finer point on it when he asks: Are White Christians ready to hear that they are called to be more Christian than White?

In a recent column, David Brooks says that he sat down to write a column that shows "we are still making gradual progress against racism and racial disparities." He was going to use statistics that point to a decline in racist attitudes. For instance, in 1967, only three percent of American newlyweds married outside their race or ethnicity. By 2015, the number had risen to 17 percent. He was set to point out that black unemployment is at a record low and that in 1960, only 38 percent of black men were members of the middle class, while today it is 57 percent. In 1960, over 40 percent of black men lived in poverty. Today only 18 percent do.¹

However, he was not able to write a cheery column, because the more he dug into the statistics, the more he discovered that "For every positive statistic indicating racial reconciliation, there was one indicating stagnation or even decay."²

If you look at the data on poverty, most of the progress occurred between 1960 and 1975. Since 1980, there's been little progress in black men moving out of poverty or into the middle class. Regarding segregation, the story is worse – both in regards to neighborhoods and schools.³

As someone who is white, I am usually unaware of my privileged position. When I enter an upscale store I am not seen with suspicion. When I pull into my neighborhood, no one wonders what I am doing there.

Our experiences play a significant role in shaping our attitudes. But, as a white male, I must remind myself that I do not know what it is like to be a woman who really needs her job, but has a male boss who tells sexually explicit jokes and touches her in ways she does not want to be touched.

I must remind myself that I do not and cannot completely understand what it is like to be gay or transgender in an environment where many people think there is something seriously wrong – or worse, perverted – with anyone who is not a heterosexual.

I must remind myself that I do not and cannot completely understand what it is like to be a Muslim in America.

I must remind myself that I do not and cannot completely understand what it is like to be an African American in our society.

I can read; I can listen to the experience of others; I can educate myself; I can try to imagine what it is like, but I can never fully understand how it feels to be an object of suspicion when I simply enter a store or drive down the street.

It never crossed Diane D'Souza's mind that she was granted certain privileges because she was white. She was from New Jersey and went to graduate school in Montreal. She never gave a second thought to crossing the US – Canadian border. In six years of traversing it, she never associated her effortless crossing with her privilege as a White American. Then, she married a man from India and her privilege disappeared. Border security guards stopped them and quizzed them about who they were and why they were coming to Canada. More often than not, they were asked to park their car and go inside to the immigration office for a more in-depth interview.

People of faith not only have a critical role to play in overcoming racism, but we should be at the head of the line leading the way. What did Jesus say our core principles ought to be? The key commandment: Love God with your entire being and love your neighbor as yourself. And the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you want to be treated. Jesus did not include an asterisk on either of those requirements which said “Except for the following cases – those of another race, ethnic background, sexual orientation or economic status.”

We want to be treated fairly, so we ought to treat others fairly. We want to be treated with respect, so we ought to treat others with respect. We want to be treated with kindness and patience, so we ought to treat others with kindness and patience. All of us know from personal experience that an ounce of kindness and an iota of respect go a long way.

Racism has been a cancer festering in our nation since its beginning. Over the years, we have made progress in several areas, but racism continues to tear apart our communities. In the past few months, we at Westminster have begun efforts to study the issues surrounding race and to explore ways that we can make progress against this evil that diminishes and destroys.

Our Session has created a Peace and Justice Work Group that is focused on racism; we have had classes focused on racial issues and this fall we have several more scheduled. We have invited David Kennedy, who has written about violence in inner city America, to speak later this month and we are pursuing a dialogue between Westminster and a local African American congregation. These are vital efforts designed to transform us individually and as a community of faith. I hope you will take advantage of these opportunities.

This story about an outsider providing the spark that transforms Jesus so that he widens his mission to all people is recorded in both the gospels of Mark and Matthew. Luke, who included half of Mark's gospel, dropped this story. Why? Perhaps it made him a bit queasy to think that Jesus would have ever hesitated to heal someone outside of his tribe. However, Luke tells the parable of the Good Samaritan which drives home the same point as today's story. An outsider – to Jews, a despicable outsider – is the one who helps the Jewish man who has been beaten and left for dead. Jesus concludes with the rhetorical question: Who is my Neighbor? And the answer is: Anyone who is need.

The question all of us must ask ourselves is this: Is our commitment to Christ solid enough that we will “go beyond the homogeneous relational boundaries we have constructed?”³ Are we committed to being a loving community of faith that is determined to dismantle racism?

To sit on the sidelines and do nothing about racism, is to show the world 1) that we do not believe everyone is created in God's image, 2) that we do not take Jesus seriously about loving our neighbor, and 3) we dismiss God's dream of people living together in peace. In other words, to do nothing about racism is to announce to all: Our faith is irrelevant.

But I know that is not true. Your faith is vital, so I encourage you to examine your thoughts and feelings about race; to confront a time in your past when you failed to show respect, to commit to understanding how the experience of people of color is different than your own experience, and to embark on a constructive course of action.

The photograph at the top of the newsletter from *Pacem in Terris* is provocative. There is a large balloon – it may be a weather balloon – about fifteen feet off the ground. There is a line tied to the bottom of the balloon which hangs down to about nine feet off the ground. About two feet below the line is a man with his arm outstretched and his hand open. Beneath this photograph is a simple headline in the form of a question. It reads: “Reaching for, or launching peace?”

You can interpret the photograph either way. The man may be reaching for the balloon or he may have just released it. It's not clear. The photo and the question nudge you to ask yourself: Am I reaching for peace wherever I find it, or am I being more proactive and launching peace. Since Jesus said “Blessed are the peacemakers,” it seems to me that Jesus wants us to grasp hold of and hang onto whatever gestures or places of peace we encounter. However, he also expects us to be initiators of peace. Wouldn't it be marvelous if people in our community began to think of the members of Westminster as *instigators* of peace?

NOTES

1. David Brooks, “The Quiet Death of Racial Progress,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 2018.
2. Ibid.
3. Luther E. Smith, Jr., “Living into God's Dream of Community,” *Living into God's Dream*, (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2016), p. 6.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of All Time and All Creation,

This is the day that you have made; we rejoice and are glad in it!

We give thanks that you have gathered us from east and west, north and south to enjoy the fellowship of this family of faith, to unite our voices in prayer and praise, to rest in your presence.

Draw near to us in this hour, and open us to your Spirit moving among us. Sustain those who are weary; encourage those who are weak; bring peace to anxious minds and hope to despairing hearts. And surprise all of us, we pray, with glimpses of your grace.

Compassionate God — We pray for people near and far, who — like the desperate mother, like the man whose ears were opened — seek your healing and wholeness. We lift before you:

- Those with ailing minds or aching bodies, those ensnared by disease or addiction, those whose spirits are heavy or whose souls are restless;
- Those suffering from a lack of resources or a poverty of opportunity; those living in neglected neighborhoods or communities torn by conflict; those who feel discarded or devalued.

- Those whose days are waning; those who helplessly watch loved ones slip away; those who feel their lives are defined by loss.

Be present, O God, with these sisters and brothers: through the compassionate care of doctors and nurses, the healing touch of family and friends, the comforting embrace of community, and the generous service of strangers who reflect your love.

Help us — the church of Jesus Christ — to embody his grace in word and deed. Free us from selfish impulses and cast out the demons of prejudice and apathy, so that we might be agents of healing and transformation in this world. By your Spirit open *our* ears to hear your Word of hope, release *our* tongues to proclaim your good news, and send us out as instruments of your astounding love.

We pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, and offer the words he taught us: **Our Father ...**