

“Who Deserves Care?”
September 6, 2009

James 2:1-9
Mark 7:24-30

Earlier this year in a sermon, I described a stress management test I learned from a friend in the Santa Fe law firm where I worked. Here’s the test: When you’re waiting in line at the grocery store and it isn’t moving as quickly as you want it to, do you (a) take the situation in stride, or (b) have an almost irresistible urge to run over the slow customers with your grocery cart? If you answer “b,” my friend explained, then you’re having trouble managing your stress, for sure.

A few months later, another lawyer in the firm, a partner, taught me about what can happen when you *flunk* the test. “Mike” was the one of the most even-tempered, kind, and considerate of the partners in the firm. He had a gentle sense of humor and humility and, unlike a number of the other partners, didn’t seem obsessed with getting more and more money. In other words, he was an all-around good guy.

But Mike was, of course, a *fully human* all-around good guy, vulnerable to flunking the stress management test and taking his frustrations out on someone else. One day at work, he told me and another associate a cautionary tale, hoping we wouldn’t follow in his footsteps.

He had been driving the day before. He must have had things weighing on his mind; one of his cases might have been going badly. While he was driving, out of the blue, another driver did something that ticked him off. Whatever she did – cut in front of him, stopped suddenly, or didn’t use a turn signal – Mike didn’t like it.

In an instant, he was angry, very angry. Mike started to yell at the other driver, and I imagine his face turned that particular shade of furious red mixed with purple. Then, when he could actually see the other driver, while he was still yelling, he ... he ... well, he gave her the finger. And in the next instant, just *after* his sign language communication, he recognized the other driver. He had been yelling and gesturing at his daughter’s favorite school teacher.

Being a kind, considerate, all-around good guy, Mike felt horrible. I think he was probably a bit worried about his and the firm’s reputation in town. (Santa Fe was still in some respects a small town, and word of certain events could spread very quickly.) And maybe Mike was even a bit worried that the teacher’s attitude toward his daughter might suffer a bit. But more than anything, Mike seemed distressed that he had verbally and “gesturally” assaulted someone, another person whose humanity he recognized only *after* he yelled at her with his words and his body language.

In this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Mark, I think Jesus is having a Mike-behind-the-wheel kind of moment. Jesus has been busy. He and the disciples are almost always on the move, and whenever they slow down or stop, people seek Jesus out for healing. By the time Jesus and his disciples reach the region of Tyre, something or someone seems to have gotten under his skin. A woman approaches him, like so many men and women have approached him in other towns and villages. She is a woman in need of care, and she is in need of healing for her daughter. Based on the gospel story so

far, we think we know what's going to happen next: Jesus will heal her daughter, no problem.

Ah, but there *is* a problem. Unlike the other women and men in need of care and healing who've been approaching Jesus, this woman is a Gentile. She doesn't belong in Jesus' circle. She's an outsider, a foreigner of sorts, perhaps the 1st century equivalent of an immigrant, legal or otherwise.

And in this story from Mark, Jesus shows his full humanity, his full Mike-behind-the-wheel kind of humanity. He doesn't tell the woman he's tired. He doesn't simply ignore her, as he does in Matthew's version of the story. He doesn't even explain to her, as he does in Matthew, that he was sent only to tend to the people of Israel. No, in Mark, the oldest and least prettified of the Gospels, Jesus compares her and her daughter to dogs who shouldn't be allowed to eat the children's food. This woman, whose name is lost to us, comes to Jesus looking for care, kindness, and healing, and what does he offer her? Rejection and insult. A cold shoulder and a cold heart.

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Two thousand years later, here in the U.S., we're in a similar moment. We're at a moment when we as a people are being asked to open our hearts and offer healing, not only to those in whom we easily see reflections of ourselves, whoever we are. We are being asked to open ourselves as a nation to those in whom we may see a stranger, a foreigner, or, as Jesus might put it, someone who doesn't deserve the children's food.

We're at a region of Tyre moment in this country, *and we have always been at such a moment*. When the Europeans arrived on this continent, they had to decide whether to care for and see the humanity of the peoples who were already here. From time to time, there may have been a few moments when the settlers recognized and honored that sacred humanity in this continent's native peoples, but those moments have been few and far between.

When the nation itself was being formed, our founders had to decide whether to include anyone other than white, property-owning men within the rights and protections of this new nation that thought of itself as a light on the hill. And, of course, our founders decided that very few people in this light-filled new nation deserved genuine care and full respect.

Looking at it through a Biblical lens, over the last 200 plus years, time and time again, this country has encountered that Gentile woman, someone who is asking to be heard, seen, honored, and embraced, and, time and time again, this country has greeted her, not as a neighbor, not as a beloved creation of God, but as a despised "other," unworthy of full recognition and care. And now, in 2009, the "others" in this encounter are those for whom the health care system is not working and those who don't even know if the system works because they can't close enough to it to find out.

We are in a region of Tyre moment. We are reflections of that fully human Jesus whom an unnamed Gentile woman with a sick child approached for help and care. As a nation, we have a history of considering certain kinds of people to be less than human, undeserving of our respect, love, and care. And, like Jesus in his first response to the Gentile woman, we as a nation have a history that shows it knows how to say "no." "No, you're not included. No, you're not welcome here."

But ... *and* ... and, like Jesus in his *second* response to the Gentile woman, we as a nation also know how to say – slowly, grudgingly, and always incompletely – "Oh. Oh.

Yes. Yes, you are included. You do deserve to be treated and cared for as a sacred, beloved child of God.”

On the national and international level, in our life as a community and a congregation, in our families, and in our daily lives, we are presented with the same choice, over and over and over again. From around the globe or around the block, from our neighbor next door or next to us on the pew, we hear the request for care, for compassion, for reverence. Sometimes the one who asks *seems* like a neighbor, a friend, part of our family, and it is easy to say, “Yes, oh, yes, you deserve care.” Sometimes, the one who asks seems strange, different, alien, *undeserving*, and the “yes” comes far less easily, if it comes at all.

If we seek to be disciples of that fully human and yet somehow fully divine Jesus ... if we seek to be people of peace ... if we seek to live as creations and expressions of a God of endless love, we must allow the circle of our care, the scope of our compassion, and the width of welcoming embrace to grow larger and larger and larger ... without end. That is the message so many Christians (and others) hear in and through Jesus. That is the message we can hear in and through other religious traditions. That is the message we can hear in and through God’s prophets, both ancient and new.

James, in the passage Jerry read for us this morning, calls his brothers and sisters to make no distinctions among themselves and to stop treating the privileged better than the impoverished. Moses, throughout the Torah, reminds the Israelites of God’s command to care for the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the alien. Jesus calls on his disciples to feed the hungry and care for the sick. Peter preaches that, since God shows no partiality, neither should we. Paul exhorts his congregations to welcome the stranger. St. Benedict urges Benedictine monks and nuns to welcome everyone as they would welcome Christ. You get the idea.

And so we are called, called to allow the circle of care, compassion, and welcome to grow ever larger. Not just when it’s easy. Not just when it includes people we agree with. Not just when it doesn’t cost us anything. Not just when it’s politically expedient. We are called to allow it to grow ever larger, period.

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Before I close, I ask you to hear what I’m *not* saying this morning.

You know as well as I do that the issue of health care reform has stirred up anger, anxiety, intolerance, and intense partisanship. There seems to have been far more heat than light in most debates. It is a complex, difficult issue with extraordinarily high stakes for the well-being of this nation.

I am not a legislative analyst. I am not a student of health care policy. I am still a lawyer, but you didn’t call me to put those skills to work by poring over the different reform proposals and possibilities. *I do not know just how the health care system needs to be reformed.* Let me repeat that. *I do not know just how the health care system needs to be reformed.* But there are a few things I *do* know.

I know that I believe Christians are called, always, always, always, to extend the circle of care and compassion.

I know that I believe we are thus called to work to extend that circle in our private lives *and* in our public lives.

I know that there will always be many different ways to take the next step in extending the circle of care and compassion.

I know that we are called to walk *humbly* with God, which means always remembering that our own ideas, knowledge, insight, and compassion remain incomplete.

And I know this – [hold up bumper sticker: “God Is Not a Republican ... or a Democrat.”] God’s “politics” transcend the partisan divide, and *so should ours*.

The question I believe the Holy One asks us to put at the center of our lives is this: “How can we help usher in God’s vision of *Shalom*, where everyone is cared for, with enough to eat and drink and a chance to discover the joys of being beloved and blessed by God.?” No single step we take in living the answer can instantly bring that vision of peace and abundance into reality. No single bit of legislation, whatever its length and complexity, can transform what is, into all that it’s meant to be.

What we *can* do is to allow God’s vision to guide us. What we *can* do is try to walk and work in the direction that moves us closer to that vision in which all creation is cared for, honored, and celebrated as holy. In our political lives and in our personal lives, what we *can* do is seek the paths that point in that direction, and keep taking one small step, in humility and hope, over and over again. In the midst of anger, anxiety, and uncertainty, in humility and hope, we can keep walking toward God’s vision for us all.

Amen and amen.

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