

Fulfilling the Royal Law 9-8-24

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Psalm 125

James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

One of the things I appreciate most about the gospels is that they show Jesus being a human person. It's easy, surrounded by crosses and stained-glass windows that memorialize Christ, to forget that Jesus existed in the flesh, with all its human limitations and complications.

In today's story, we see Jesus attempting for a hiatus from his ministry. He hadn't been able to get away from people, he had to have been exhausted, and he was definitely fed up with the religious elites. So, he tried to take a break. No one was offering him a Sabbath rest, and he recognized his own limitations, so he left. He went into gentile country, heathen country, away from the Jews to whom he was called. He just needed a minute to not be swamped by people's needs.

Well, it wasn't that simple. He was more famous than he'd planned. So, when this foreign woman approaches him, asking for something he had been tasked by God to provide to the Jews, he responds in an offensive way. Now, thousands of years of speculation has gone into what Jesus meant by being so offensive. So, I'm not going to solve it this morning. But I can tell you a couple things. the fact that he speaks with a woman at all, that he banters with her, and that he ultimately provides her what she requests, all indicate there was purpose in it.

Have you ever asked for something you needed because it was something you couldn't do for yourself? Ever been in a situation where you were disliked or even hated because of

something you couldn't change about yourself? Have you ever felt those things compounded at the same time? Have you ever been in a position where you felt that type of humiliation and desperation? In sociology, those types of compounding limiting factors are called "intersectionality." But just because it has a relatively new name does not mean it's a new phenomenon. Just ask the Syrophenician woman.

As Americans, we base our values on and like to think that our country is founded on principles of equality, after all, it's in our Declaration of Independence, our founding document. Except that it says all "men," not all people. Women were not originally included in the guarantee of universal rights. Men of color were not even seen as fully human, so they also fell outside the metric for equality. It wasn't until the 1960s that women had the freedom to get a bank account, or African Americans were permitted equal access to things as basic as bathrooms. That was not very long ago. And in our present day, immigrants and refugees continue to feel the same impact of inequality and lack of access to resources. Our ideals want people to have what they need, but we're not always successful at ensuring those things for all people.

Anyone who was ever called names on the playground because of their body shape, their clothes, the inability to perform as well as others, or their family name, understands the sting of being seen as an outsider. So, even the most privileged among us, can empathize with the feeling of being "othered." And I think we can all admit that while being an outsider is sometimes painful for the heart, for those under the compounding impacts of intersectionality over generations, the pain and oppression for both body and soul can be almost insurmountable. You don't have to look very far to see it. In fact, this parish has a history of noticing and caring for the needs of those who find themselves in those very situations.

So, when we hear this story about Jesus' response to the woman, we don't learn from it that we should cast racial slurs because that's what Jesus did. No, we learn that the gift of healing and love is available beyond the apparent walls separating people. Anyone willing to track Jesus down, to insist that Jesus act on our behalf out of love, will find the resources that love provides. Jesus wasn't ultimately trying to chase this woman away, he wanted her passion, her tenacity. Jesus appreciated feistiness. It proved the woman understood the heart of God, who loves with boundary crossing love. The kind of love that can be shocking because of the cultural constructs it shatters. At Jesus' time, the shocking thing wasn't his offensive response to her, that would have been normal. The shock was that he talked to her at all and that he answered her request.

When we, in The Episcopal Church talk about "Justice," there can be a lot of confusion about it. James talks about the favoritism, the caste system, that exists in all communities of people. It may not exist in the U.S. like it does in places like India, but probably most of the people in this building would consider themselves part of the Middle Class. Friends, that means we are admitting that there are those both above and below us. Caste is a "social hierarchy, often defined by occupation, income, education, or social status." Just because we are Americans does not mean we are somehow beyond this basic reality that exists whenever humans live together in groups. We stratify. According to James, this manifests within Christian communities by the way we treat one another. And, according to James, if we show partiality, if we allow these social distinctions to exist between people, we are transgressors of the law of Love, just like any murderer or adulterer. He insists that true faith will cause us to work towards removing the distinctions between us. According to James, where believers exist, there should not be anyone lacking daily food or appropriate clothing. No one should be in need.

Which is why when the Episcopal Church speaks about Justice, we equate that to “repairing the breach in society and institutions”. Rather than daily handing out peanut butter sandwiches, we believe that restoration on a deeper level is needed, so that we all have equal access to the peanut butter and the bread. I’m not saying handing out food and clothing isn’t important, I’m just saying, regardless of how you believe this is best done, the fact that the work needs to be done on a deeper, more systematic level so no people exist in a consistent state of neediness, is something upon which we all agree. That is the work of Justice.

God calls us all to seek justice, but our work is not all the same. I don’t know what work God might be inviting us into. But James may hold a key to help us discern that answer. James elevates the poor in this world by saying they have been chosen to be rich in faith. If we are not the ones feeling the daily lack of necessary resources, then James is telling us we have something to learn from their faith. So, we face two questions: 1) who are the needy, poor, hungry, people whom I have made myself a student of in order to learn faith? And 2) What has their faith taught me about how to work towards justice? These are big questions, humbling questions. But they are key to our ability to live out this Royal Law.

We, like Jesus, know what it feels like to be worn out. The needs we experience personally and the needs we witness around us can feel exhausting and insurmountable. Even Jesus stepped away to try to get rest when he could. It isn’t wrong for us to seek rest. And, like Jesus, when we are faced with the needs of others, The Royal Law, this law of love, can move us to act in surprising ways. May we be a people who seek Justice; whose hearts, imaginations, and hands are moved by the same things that moved Jesus!