

Mark 7:24-37

Insiders and Outsiders

I heard a tough story this week about a really nice eleven year old girl from a friend. For the sake of the story let's just call her Sally. Because of the way she was born, Sally has some minor social and learning challenges and this has resulted in fewer friends as the years have progressed. Things have gotten worse this year at school and on many days no one will play with Sally on the play ground. Sally's best friend Linda has a new friend who doesn't like to play with Sally. In fact the new friend won't hang with Linda, unless Linda refuses to play with Sally. Those of us who are thirty or forty or older may forget how hard it is and how much it hurts to be the outsider on the playground in elementary school. The insiders are not only leaving Sally out, they are actively excluding her.

Today's two stories from the Gospel of Mark are about healing. A gentile woman, that is, a woman who is not Jewish asks Jesus to heal her daughter. A deaf man is brought to Jesus by his friends to be healed. But today's two stories from Mark are also stories about insiders and outsiders. The woman is an outsider because she is not Jewish and she is of Syrian origin. The deaf man is an outsider

because he cannot hear. In Jesus time, people thought that deaf people were deaf because they were bad and God was punishing them. We don't think like that anymore. In the end Jesus heals both outsiders. In the end Jesus crosses boundaries. In the end Jesus breaks down the walls and welcomes the outsiders into the main circle. In the end, Jesus teaches us that we too should welcome the outsider into our circle.

I have a game I have played with Middle School and High School Youth. In a group any larger than eight or nine, I send three students outside of the room. I tell them to come into the room one at a time and that when they come in, they will find the rest of the group grasping arms tightly in a circle and that their job is to do whatever it takes to get into the circle. I go back into the room and I tell the group to form a circle and to keep the other youth out no matter what they try. If they try to crawl in, sit on them and move the circle. If they try to jump in block them. If they try to force their way in, hold tight and push back. Then I tell the group there is one exception. If the outsiders ask nicely to be let into the circle, then let them in.

The game can get very physical. Sometimes kids try to jump and shove and push their way in. Sometimes after a while they give up and say, “what is the point, they won’t let me in.” One time one of my smaller young teens tried everything to get in and she was nearly in tears and she said with watery eyes, “could you guys please just let me in the circle?” And they did. There is lots of great discussion after the game about strategies and feelings. Wouldn’t it be great if insiders would let outsiders in, if they simply asked very nicely.

Actually that is what happens in the first story in the Gospel of Mark. The Syrophenician bowed down at Jesus feet and asked him to heal her daughter. She literally begs him to let her into his circle. She asks Jesus very nicely for acceptance and help. And then in one of those embarrassing biblical moments, Jesus does not do what we expect him to do. Instead of being nice and instead of welcoming the woman and healing the woman, he calls her a dog. Jesus gets nasty. Jesus engages in name calling.

A lot of adults and scholars try to gloss over this situation. They try to pretend it didn’t happen. They try to explain it away. They try to say that Jesus didn’t mean it or that he was using some sort of proverb or secret nice name. But that’s not true. We have an

instance in scripture where, Jesus fully human acts perfectly human. He calls the women of a different nationality and religion a dog.

Do you remember when you first realized that your parents made mistakes? When we are very young, our parents are our heroes. We love them and trust them and utterly depend on them for love and security and then somewhere along the line we realize, that yah our parents love us but they make mistakes. And boy that is shocker and a shaker to our world view. We don't feel quite as safe anymore. By the time we get to ninth grade, many of us think that our parents make way too many mistakes and sometimes we are embarrassed to be around them.

That's how we could feel about this story. Jesus maybe embarrasses us because Jesus makes a mistake. I don't enjoy pointing this out; but the plain fact of the matter is that for a moment there Jesus was not very nice and he would not welcome in the outsider. This is out of character, because Jesus son of God was all about welcoming in the outsider, that was one of his main missions. He always loved the unlovable. He always made friends with the people everyone else ignored. He always was chums with the people who were picked upon. Just this one time he goofed. You know

sometimes, other people pressure us to make bad decisions. Sometimes we make assumptions and we have prejudices and we are not even aware of our insider keep outsiders away point of view.

To his credit, when the Syrian woman challenged him, Jesus backed right down and told her she was right. To his credit, he changed his mind and he healed her daughter. To his credit, Jesus realized that he had not been nice, that he had made a mistake, that he could do better and he changed directions. The outsider taught Jesus a valuable lesson and he learned he had a blind spot.

Actually when you think about, for whatever reason Jesus made the mistake, he showed us all how to handle mistakes. When someone points out that we are wrong, we ought to be man enough and women enough and mature enough and Jesus enough to acknowledge our mistake and work to change things.

This is why our church is involved with Habitat for Humanity. We help people buy and live in decent houses because we realize there is something wrong with the world if hardworking people can't afford a home. We work with them and we partner with them to help them buy their own house.

This is why our church will be hosting the Winter Relief Homeless shelter. We will host homeless people to a warm place to stay at night because we realize there are things wrong with our world if some one doesn't have a safe and warm place to sleep. Things are pretty complicated sometimes and we are going to help people until they figure some things out.

That is why we try to welcome guests who come to worship at church. We figure folks might be looking for some friends or looking for a safe place to ask some questions about God. We sure hope that when people visit Ark and Dove they won't feel like an outsider. There already is enough of that in the world. It hurts to be left out on the playground, to be treated differently because you are from Syria or have different religion or because you can't hear. God calls insiders to welcome the outsiders. That's one description of a disciple of Jesus, some one who welcomes the outsider.