

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost – September 9, 2018 – Welcome Home
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister
Mark 7:24-37

FOR REFLECTION

“True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands--whether of individuals or entire peoples--need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world.”

~ Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Grumpy Generosity

I'm guessing that Jesus was an introvert. First, he didn't start his public ministry until he was 30 – an age at which introverts often gain enough social skills to carry off a public persona and then restore themselves for the next encounter. Second, he kept wandering off to find solitude for rest and prayer. Third, he kept telling people not to tell others about his healing capacity – and was frustrated when they spread the word.

Our text this morning starts out in Gennesaret on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus has just had a debate with Jewish religious leaders about washing one's hands before eating.

“From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. **He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.**”

Tyre is about 35 miles north on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea – in another country, Phoenicia. *[See map.]*

This is Greek country where people aren't likely to know him. Our author, Mark, says specifically that Jesus “**did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice...**”

A Greek woman, specifically Syrophenician, “immediately heard about him.” How did she hear about him so fast? The grapevine, of course! You may have thought the grapevine *[see the banner above the altar]* represented Jesus and the communion wine – but actually it represents the rapid communication system, the word of mouth about Jesus' words and actions that spread faster the more Jesus asked them not to tell.

His conversation with Charis (I made up her name – most women in the Bible aren't named – Charis is a lovely Greek name meaning “Charity”) – this conversation isn't the

usual kind and compassionate exchange of words between Jesus and someone who is suffering.

Charis has a daughter who is mentally ill in some way – possessed by “an unclean spirit.” “She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.”

27 He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Scholars agree that the children referred to are the Jewish people, the chosen people of G-d that Jesus is bringing his message to. And the “dogs” are the Greeks – a common epithet. This is not a message of inclusion. It is an insult meant to put distance between Jesus and this woman who wasn’t even supposed to know he was there.

28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter."

Although insulted, Charis doesn’t skip a beat or try to raise herself and her standing with Jesus. She takes the hit and suggests that compassion should extend itself even to dogs – which, in the middle east, are considered filthy animals. Jesus, although annoyed and put upon – grumpy about being found in this supposedly hidden location – gives Charis credit for her persistence and spunk – her intelligence and sense of humor. And he heals Charis’ daughter – let’s call her Artemis – of her mental illness.

So, Jesus decides that hiding in a house anywhere isn’t going to get him the rest he needs. So, he goes on a walking tour hoping, perhaps, that if he keeps moving, people won’t be able to keep up.

He goes 20 miles north along the Mediterranean coast to Sidon – and then way inland, through Syria, to the east shore of Galilee in Decapolis.

Even in Decapolis some people apparently knew he was coming – as they greet him immediately with a deaf gentleman with a speech impediment. Jesus takes him to a private location to heal his ears and his tongue – and orders (not asks but orders) the man and his friends NOT to tell anyone. Ordering people about – especially by a humble person – indicates he is grumpy. Just ask my family.

But the grapevine is not to be silenced – or pruned – or whatever the metaphor calls for. And his deeds are proclaimed far and wide.

I LOVE this story. As a not very humble introvert – I am happy to discover that the Son of G-d – and maybe even G-d our creator themselves – gets cranky sometimes!!! Jesus, being fully human, experienced many human emotions – including grief and joy and exhaustion. And as G-d’s earthly manifestation, this gives us clues to what G-d the Maker is like.

And my guess is that Climate Change kick-back is a divine warning that we need to step back, check our behavior, give the Creator some room to fix what we’ve broken – or we will experience the full impact of G-d’s grumpiness.

The story of Noah's flood takes on a whole new meaning as our oceans rise and the weather gets wanky. And I ask you – do rainbows exist if no one is there to see them? (I digress.)

None of this changes the character or nature of G-d – or Jesus for that matter. It fills out – a little more – our understanding of things larger than ourselves.

Jesus still heals people, G-d still provides, our world is still generous – even though there is a deep need on the part of all of creation to go on retreat and restore itself.

Our story reminds us of several things.

It reminds us that even Divine beings and the planet itself could use some down time – some care and time to restore themselves.

It reminds us that it's okay for us to get grumpy – and take that as a sign that we could use some down time to get our energy back.

And it reminds us that even in the midst of grumpiness and frustration about the condition of our country and our world, we can still be generous and compassionate – toward all of life – not just humans – and not just humans who are like us.

Welcome back from any rest and travelling you have done this summer.

May it have a healing effect on our collective grumpiness.

May G-d take any left-over grumpiness and turn it into acts of restorative justice –
for humans who are suffering –
for all creatures great and small –
and for the planet itself.

Scripture Reading for Sunday September 9, 2018 – Seventeenth after Pentecost – Year B

Mark 7:24-37 (NRSV)

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. **He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,** 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

27 He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter."

30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 **He took him aside in private, away from the crowd,** and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."