

11 September 2016

**Good News for the Stranger**  
Exodus 22:21-24; Mark 7:24-30

There is nothing relevant in the Old Testament law, right? It's all just boring stuff about how to build tabernacles and how to sacrifice cubits and so on. Take this passage from the Law of Moses, Exodus 22:21-24:

*You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger in your midst, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.*

Whatever the Law of Moses said about how to treat strangers, that part of the law had been forgotten by Jesus' time. Non-Jews were less than second-class citizens. They were "untouchables." Like this Gentile woman from Syrophenicia. We read Mark 7:24-30:

*From there [Jesus] 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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

This is a troublesome story, isn't it? Why is Jesus so mean to that woman? It bothers us. Worse than that, Jesus' offhanded dismissal of the Gentile woman conflicts with everything else we read about Jesus in the Gospels. Nowhere else does he refuse to deal with someone on the basis of ethnicity. He heals Samaritan lepers and Greek demoniacs, feeds crowds of Gentiles, chats with a Samaritan woman of dubious morality, and forgives the Romans who crucify him. But here he ignores this Syrophenician woman at first, then tells her that he's not really supposed to help Gentiles, and finally only heals her daughter after she humiliates herself to him. This is hardly the Jesus we're familiar with. All I can suggest is that Jesus was doing all this to teach his disciples an important lesson. If so, then he always meant to heal the woman's daughter, but first wanted to guide his disciples through the learning process. So, when the Gentile woman came to ask help, Jesus assumed the usual Jewish attitude toward the dirty Gentiles, an attitude his disciples probably already had, spoke to her in the brisk manner that his followers were probably wishing he would (I can imagine them nodding their heads in approval), only to pull the rug out from under their smug feet by healing her daughter after all. If this interpretation is right – and it's the only one that makes sense to me in the larger context of Jesus' ministry – then the point of the whole story is that God's kingdom is not just for the privileged, chosen few but also for outsiders.

It was a lesson his disciples needed to learn, but it shouldn't have been. All through the Old Testament we read that God cares about all people. Yes, God chose the Jews. But when God called Abraham – the father of the Jews – God said that it was in order that Abraham could be a “blessing to all nations.” In the passage from Exodus 22 that we read earlier, God declares firmly, even passionately, that all the “strangers” who live among you are under God’s protection, and the Hebrews were *not* to oppress them. The prophets frequently declare God’s concern for other nations. As we saw a few weeks ago, God even sent the Hebrew prophet Jonah to preach to the hated Assyrians. Sure, there are times in the Old Testament history when the Hebrews closed themselves off from foreigners and built walls to keep them out – sometimes even literal walls, as in Nehemiah – but the overall witness of the Hebrew Bible makes it clear that those retrenchments are not God’s plan. As God says in Isaiah 56, “My house shall be a house of prayer for all people.”

Now, again, the time of Jesus was one of those times when the Jews were circling the wagons and vilifying all non-Jews. Gentiles weren't just foreigners to the Jews of first century Palestine: they were germs, less than the dust beneath their feet. And that, I think, is why Jesus takes the time to lead his disciples step by step to the stunning conclusion that perhaps, just perhaps, God cares about foreigners as well. In fact, Syrophenician lives matter.

This fall I am spending some time exploring the concept of the “gospel”: the good news of Jesus Christ. Last week I described the gospel in general terms: we are created in such a way that we instinctively seek meaning, but none of us are able to find satisfactory meaning on our own. Left to ourselves we invariably come up with things like: “I’d be fulfilled if I could just win the lottery,” or “If I could get on American Idol and become famous, then I’d never want anything else.” But these hopes always disappoint, even if we get them. Only through the Christ-event – God breaking into our lives to bring us meaning from beyond this world – can we ever find the peace we are looking for. We cannot achieve salvation; but if we will open ourselves to the love that God freely gives, we will find the purpose that we seek.

But notice one inescapable consequence of this gospel. If none of us are able to find true meaning without God’s active assistance, then none of us have an edge over anyone else. It doesn’t matter if we were born to Christian parents, or if we’ve been baptized. It doesn’t help to be a citizen of a predominantly Christian nation or even a United Methodist. The very fact that the good news of Christ is for everyone is a great equalizer. That’s what the Old Testament teaches, and that’s what Christ demonstrated for his disciples. There are no national or ethnic or racial or cultural advantages. We are equally in need of God and equally welcomed by God.

So. What does that mean for the church? Well, one thing it means is that we’ve been doing a lot of things very badly for a very long time. It is difficult to imagine someone looking at the American church and concluding that we really believe that distinctions are irrelevant before God. More often than not, church is the place we go where we are most likely to find people exactly like us. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said, “11:00 on Sunday morning ... [is] the most segregated hour in the nation.” Now, more than forty years later, that’s no longer exactly true. A lot of churches have Saturday night services now.

But King's point is as valid today as it was then. About 85% of American churches are segregated churches – defined as consisting of at least 80% of one ethnic group. Some of you might actually be surprised at how low that number is. Really? Are 15% of churches actually multi-ethnic? Yeah, don't get too excited: a lot of those are Roman Catholic. Methodists? We're 93% segregated. But, you might ask, is that really bad? After all, there are differences in culture and musical style between ethnic groups. Aren't we all more comfortable in our own cultural milieu? And there's some truth to that. I, for one, get nervous about worshipping in a Black church, where my rhythm disability would be obvious. But before we just go with the "cultural differences" excuse, we should ask two questions. First, what does it say about us as a church if our most distinctive features are determined by our culture instead of the gospel? And second, where is it written that we're supposed to be comfortable in church? Loved, yes. Cared for, yes. Encouraged, yes. Inspired, yes. Valued, yes. Comfortable? I don't know that verse.

Is the segregation of the church a problem? Yes. You see, the more we cut ourselves off from people who are not like us the easier it is to despise them. It's what the Jews had done to Gentiles in Jesus' day. Jews weren't even to *talk* to Gentiles, so it was easy to believe that they were evil. Here's a statistic I read a couple of weeks ago. As you are aware, the past couple of years, since Ferguson, Missouri, have been filled with news reports and viral videos of black men killed by police. Now there are two basic narratives to explain this data. Either these killings are indications of systemic racism in America or they are isolated incidents perpetrated by a few bad apples. I'm not going to get into that debate except to say that nothing important is as simple as a choice between two-options. No, the statistic I want to share has to do with who believes which narrative. When asked, 70% of the Black community believed these deaths were signs of systemic racism. The larger White community in America, by contrast, was split: 50% thought these incidents were systemic racism and 50% thought they were isolated, unconnected incidents. But when White *Christians* were asked that question, only 25% thought these reports were signs of racism. Three quarters of us said that they were just isolated incidents. I find that stunning. Whatever the reality may be, I could not believe that there was a 45% perception difference between Black Americans and White American Christians. The only way that's possible is if we have so totally self-segregated our churches that no one in either community is talking or listening to the other. It's as if we live on different planets.

Well, the good news – depending on your perspective – is that this won't last. America is changing. By many demographic projections, 2040 is the year when Whites will no longer be a majority in the United States. Some states are already there. In Texas, by 2060 Whites won't even be the largest *minority*. The segregated church of like-minded people with similar levels of melanin in their skin, the model we've been following our entire history, has always been a terrible reflection of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now it's become a terrible business plan, too. In the next generation, the churches that thrive in terms of both witness and viability are likely to be multi-ethnic churches.

Now I realize that fostering multi-ethnic churches faces some challenges in northern Wisconsin. Five or six years ago, at a Wisconsin pastor's meeting, we were being encouraged to reach out to minority groups, and one pastor stood up and said, "Um, I understand what you're saying, but I serve Rhinelander United Methodist Church. I might be able to find a couple of Swedes. Would that count?" So I'm not suggesting that we need to start a diversity program here

or something. All I'm doing is pointing out that the gospel says one thing – all are equally welcomed by God, without distinction – and the American church has not represented that gospel well. My question for us, myself included, is the individual question: How have I been a part of that? Have I been too comfortable with a community of people just like me? Have I isolated myself from hearing the voices of others? What can I do about that?