

Highfield Rd Uniting Church

Navigating boundaries

Mark 7:24 - 37



Jesus crosses boundaries.

The story of Jesus seeking some rest away from the crowds in Galilee by going to the foreign territory of Tyre and being approached with a request for healing by a woman from Syrophenicia is, for many, a controversial picture of Jesus. Where is the 'gentle Jesus meek and mild', the

Jesus who is open and welcoming and compassionate? Did he really call this woman a dog? Like the earlier story of Jesus' family coming to take him home and Jesus' rebuke, "who is my mother and my brothers?", we are confronted with a difficult impression. Do we take the words at face value and determine an image of Jesus, or do we keep in mind all that we know about Jesus and interrogate the words and the story more closely? Considering that Mark opened his account of Jesus life with "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God", I am sure that he didn't intend for us to hear a story of grumpy Jewish Jesus being given a lesson in racism and sexism by a clever Gentile woman. Is there another way into these two stories of crossing boundaries? Boundaries of race, religion, disability and culture.

I have heard of an incident in a church when a church leader, responding to repeated requests for information, said, "Oh, you're like a dog with a bone!" The person to whom it was addressed, being from another culture, took it as a racial insult. A common metaphor for persistence, is heard in another culture as an insult.

Can we imagine Jesus, who as a Jew is the despised foreigner in Tyre, using a common metaphor for the wisdom of running a household, i.e. feeding your children before you feed the pets? Maybe it is even a common metaphor in Tyre. And the woman, rather than being offended at any racial slur, picking up the metaphor and finding her place in it. The metaphor for feeding is interesting as it balances the two lowest of the family structure - children and pets - but also brings those two lowest into the common gathering - the meal table. In something like a battle of humility, God's grace doesn't stop at the powerful or the leaders, it extends to all.

The woman, entering into the metaphor and making this encounter a conversation, in effect says, "Yes, I know you have a priority for the children of Israel, but you have chosen to come into our territory, shouldn't we have the chance to claim a little of your ministry?" It is her willingness to engage in the conversation, her belief and faith that will not be squashed, even by common wisdom, that brings about the healing of her daughter. Jesus has crossed a boundary into Gentile space, and the woman has crossed a boundary in talking to a man in public. And their mutual boundary crossing, with all the potential problems of language and culture, brings an encounter, out of which shines the grace of God, the healing of the daughter.

Then, after a little journey, that on a map looks bizarrely circuitous and brings into question Mark's knowledge of Palestinian geography, but which can be interpreted as "Jesus went from Tyre to the Decapolis avoiding Jewish areas", we get another encounter that brings into question the identity and character of Jesus, and the issues of language when you cross boundaries. After a miracle where it all happens powerfully but mysteriously at a distance, Jesus resorts to spit and touch in private like some sort of magician. Is this the same Jesus? But consider the boundary of disability; the man is deaf. Jesus, and indeed the friends of this man, can't tell him he's going to be healed. What is needed is the body language of touch and action.

I'm always intrigued by science fiction stories of contact across cultures and species. Something as simple as the offer of a handshake. How does another culture know what that means? It could be a request for a gift. Or an offer of a fight. Or it could be offensive because touch is frowned upon. A common action for us could be misinterpreted by others.

Jesus could have responded to the friend's request to lay hands on him, but Jesus, knowing he is again confronted by boundaries - racial, cultural and disability - chooses a culturally familiar action that to us looks like a magician, but for the man would feel like 'someone is taking care of me'. In this case the language issue is one of body language. At the same time, he takes the man to a private place so that his actions can't be interpreted by the crowd as the work of a magician.

I don't think we understand that when we read scripture, we are crossing boundaries. Boundaries of culture and race and time, and we have to be careful not to read as if the passage was written in our time and our culture.

There is a wise saying that the search for the Historical Jesus can become like staring down a deep well and seeing a dim reflection of ourselves. We can become fooled into reading ourselves, and our understanding of the world, into the scripture. A common metaphor of Jesus time can sound like an insult to us. A careful action can look like a mistake or a step out of character.

Learning something about the culture and behaviour of 1st Century Palestine can help. And holding to an image of Jesus can also help; not an image that blows around with every story.

Today's selection from Mark are not stories about Jesus being frail and human and racist, these are stories about the importance of sensitivity in crossing the boundaries of race, culture, gender, and disability. The importance of language and gesture and inclusion, so that the good news of god's grace and care can travel without misunderstanding, without cultural corruption. Take care, when crossing boundaries, to consider and be respectful of the other, and not impose your understanding, behaviour, or culture.