

Jesus calls this poor, Greek woman a dog! If I had been writing Mark's Gospel, I probably would have left this part out. It's not that Jesus doesn't want to help suffering people – that's what he's been doing all along – but his mission is to the children of Israel who were governed by Rome, weighed down by heavy taxes, subject to poverty and illness. Jesus already had his hands full without this Greek woman pulling at him. Like a triage nurse in a ward full of badly wounded people, if Jesus turns to help this one, another may die.

Yet this woman is tenacious: "What you say about dogs is true," she counters, "but even the dogs are allowed to clean up the children's crumbs." "Touché," says Jesus. "Stranger, for a cultured educated, classical Greek, you are also wise." And Jesus heals her daughter. Jesus takes time out of his trip to respond to the need presented to him.

From here, Mark takes Jesus on a ridiculous itinerary. He says that Jesus went from Tyre to Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the Decapolis. It's the equivalent of saying that Jesus traveled from Fergus Falls to Fargo by way of Minneapolis and Sioux City. If you check the maps in the back of your study Bible, you see that Tyre is to the northwest of Galilee along the Mediterranean Sea, and Sidon is north of Tyre; and the Sea of Galilee isn't anywhere near the Decapolis, which is the regional name for ten cities in modern day Jordan (to the southeast).

Was Mark confused about his geography? Did his compass not point due north? Was his map written by Blind Bartimaeus? Or is it possible, even probable, that Mark intentionally told the story this way, blurring geography into a theology of what it's like to follow Jesus? Jesus led his disciples all over the countryside, even out of Galilee into Gentile territory. Out there on the Palestinian wilderness, places and people got mixed up. No one stayed put, nothing stayed orderly, and no place stayed fixed. Out there, as the healing of both the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter and the blind man show, the message and compassion of Jesus are pushed to their geographic and ethnic limits.

Jesus went to Sidon for much-deserved peace and quiet, but he couldn't rest. He is sought out by a woman who needs him. Jesus reaches out and heals her daughter, even though her presence required him to deviate from his intended path. Yet, Jesus allowed himself to be sidetracked from his original intent and his itinerary in order that the Gospel might begin to reach beyond Israel.

Through some topsy-turvy geography Mark is saying, "When you follow Jesus, be ready for surprises, unexpected circumstances, and for people you didn't expect to meet." Mark didn't

make a geographical mistake: he made a theological statement. Mark knew where Tyre and Sidon were located. He also knew that Jesus was creating a new world order where geography is not closed, but open to God's possibilities; where the future is not clearly mapped out, but is subject to detours demanded by the unpredictable geography of God's grace.

This Greek woman with courage and determination and this Gentile blind man out there on the fringe – these typify the way God's unexpected geography gets us somewhere we would never have gone if we had simply stuck to the map. Jesus got to the Sea of Galilee by going north and east when he needed to go south. That's the way it is sometimes with God's geography: the detour may actually lead us to where God intends for us to be.

Just look at some of the world's great scientific discoveries: they happened on the way to somewhere else.

- Scottish biologist Alexander Fleming (1928) discovered strange, new type of mold growing on dishes he accidentally left in his sink while on his summer holiday: that mold created the base for penicillin.
- American Engineer Percy Spencer (1945) walked by a magnetron, a vacuum tube used to generate micro waves, and noticed the chocolate bar in his pocket melted. After a few more experiments, Spencer invented the microwave oven.
- On a hiking trip, Swiss engineer Georges de Mestral (1941) found burrs clinging to his pants and his dog's fur. On closer inspection, he found that the burr's hooks would cling to anything loop-shaped. The resulting invention: Velcro.
- In the 1830s, rubber was a popular substance for waterproof shoes and boots, but its inability to withstand freezing temperatures and extreme heat left customers frustrated. Charles Goodyear (1839) accidentally dropped some rubber onto a hot stove: he named the resulting charred leather-like substance, vulcanized rubber which is both pliable and temperature resistant.
- Roy Plunkett (1938), a scientist with DuPont, wanted to make refrigerators more home-friendly by replacing the current refrigerant – a mixture of ammonia, sulfur dioxide and propane) – with something less toxic. After opening the container on one particular test sample, Plunkett found his experimental gas gone. What remained was a strange, slippery heat resistant resin, which he branded Teflon, which transformed the cooking industry.

A good researcher travels with a willingness to be detoured. A good disciple travels with a willingness to follow where Jesus leads, to wherever the need is greatest, even when it leads off the fairway and into the rough. Jesus took the long way around to get to the Sea of Galilee because he got sidetracked by strangers: that detour broke the Gospel free of its geography and opened it wide to include us.

Sometimes I go home at the end of the day, and Karen asks me, “How was your day?” Typically, I tell her all the things I intended to do during the day and I end up lamenting all the things I was unable to cross off my “to do” list. And invariably, Karen replies, “Good! You did ministry today.” The interruptions, the distractions, and the detours are God’s way of sending me off my predetermined track and putting me back on God’s kingdom track.

In the words of John Henry Newman: “Let us put ourselves into [God’s] hands and not be startled though [God] leads us by a strange way...Let us be sure [God] will lead us right, that [God] will bring us to that which is, not indeed what we think best, nor what is best for another, but what is best for us.”

Faith is the belief that God does order life, give direction, and forge odd people and strange circumstances together into an orderly whole. It may not make sense to us, but it makes perfect sense to God. How did you get here today? Where has your faith journey led you? What detours of faith directed your steps? Enjoy the interruptions, the distractions, and the detours: they may just be God’s way of telling you something.

Prayer: Through the twists and turns of our lives you have followed us, good God. Even when we were unaware that you were there, you stood in the wings, coaching us when we did not know what to say, prodding us when we were slow to move forward, and comforting us when we fell on our faces. We would love for our lives to be an orderly progression from stupidity to wisdom, from innocence to experience, from disbelief to faith. Yet today we are reminded that the path is not always so certain and sure. The journey we make is one of constant twists and turns – full of surprises. We are also reminded that the twists and turns are given meaning because you make the journey with us. Walk with us Lord, so that we might be enabled to walk with you. Amen.

Sources:

- “10 Awesome Accidental Discoveries.” www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/g1216/10-awesome-accidental-discoveries
- John Henry Newman, “Meditations and Devotions.”

Detours of Faith

Sunday, September 6, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Mark 7:24-37

Writer Kathleen Norris subtitled her book *Dakota, “A Spiritual Geography.”* When you read her moving account of life in Lemmon, a tiny town on the Great Plains between North and South Dakota, then you know what she means by “spiritual geography.” Place, wind, plains, dust, rain, and hail are of primal importance in Norris’ life there. As Norris explains, “Geography derives from the Greek words for earth and writing, and writing about Dakota has been my means of understanding the inheritance and reclaiming what is there in it.” Thinking at first that the plains were barren and devoid of meaning, Norris says that they “now seem bountiful in their emptiness, offering solitude and room to grow.”

“Spiritual geography” could be a way to characterize much of the Gospel of Mark. Little is made of geography or place in the first half of the Gospel; then, in Mark 7:24 geography suddenly becomes very important. Jesus is on the move, moving out of his native district of Galilee, moving out into foreign territory, into *the vicinity of Tyre...through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.* (7:31).

Mark’s rather peculiar geography is the noteworthy: Jesus takes a detour from his usual route and ends up out in foreign, Gentile territory. Here we have an example of the Scriptures using geography to do theology. Mark begins the story of Jesus up in Galilee, in the boondocks among poor, rural people. Then, step by step, Mark takes Jesus from Galilee where the simple folk receive him gladly to Jerusalem where the sophisticated and politically powerful capital city people crucify him. By moving Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, Mark says something about who Jesus is and why he died: Jesus came for all, but especially for those whom the world least values.

In today’s text, Jesus is in Gentile territory, beyond the bounds of Israel, out among foreigners and strangers. Jesus went to Sidon to get away from the press of the crowds who followed him. But while in Sidon, he is confronted by a Syro-Phoenician woman who wants Jesus to heal her daughter. Unfortunately, she is the wrong kind of woman. She is a foreigner, a Gentile, and a stranger to the promises of Israel. And what Jesus says to her makes us blush: “It isn’t right to take the children’s bread and throw it to dogs.”