



EMERGING PROPHETIC VOICES - GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE 2012 SERMON

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The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7: 23-29) is a story of awkward moments. That horrible encounter when people, spaces, words and actions are out of place and the boundaries that we create to help us make sense of our lives collapse in on themselves and something new has to develop to move us out of that moment.

The encounter of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman is a story in which things are out of place. The people in the story are in places they should not be, the words that pass in the conversation are out of place, and inappropriate in fact, even the actions of the characters are out of place. In fact Mark even locates the story in narrative in which Jesus and his disciples are accused of being unclean or out of place and Jesus breaks into the conflict by saying that it is not what happens in the exterior of our lives that makes us out of place, or unclean or impure, but our internal attitude. But who decides what is “in place” or appropriate? Who decides who and what is “out of place”?

In our time, some of us would say that that choice is our own. Each person marches to their own beat. Others of us might say that it is the community. Whatever and whoever that community maybe. In some cases, it is our family, our friends, our country’s policies, our company’s ethos. In our time there are whole spectrums of answers to that question: Who decides?

But to be true to the text we have to locate this incident in Mark’s gospel within its timeframe and its cultural context.

Exegesis

The story is located in the Mediterranean world of the Ancient Near East. While in our time our understanding of ourselves comes from a predominately individualistic understanding of life, where individual expression and emancipation is valued, in the Mediterranean world of Jesus, it is the community's emancipation and expression that is of ultimate value and the individual functions for the good of the group. It is the community, the village, the tribe or clan that decides what is appropriate, what is "in place". These rules were also very important to the community because it was through deciding what and who was in or out, pure or impure, clean or unclean that the community expressed its identity, protected itself and maintained its unity.

Furthermore because there was no separation of religion, politics, economics and the normal day to day functioning of the community, the religious cults and in this case the religious cult of Yahweh and the Temple became the custodians of the values of the community. Thus one of the roles of a religious teacher or a Rabbi was to uphold the boundaries and the rules that would help the community understand what was pure and impure, clean and unclean.

These values would carry within them the concern of the community, politically, ethnically, economically and religiously. It would govern every aspect of life, holding it all within the cult of Yahweh. So everything from food to child birth had its appropriate articulation and practice that would ensure the wellbeing and unity of the Jewish community. Anything outside of this practice would be considered unclean, impure or dirty. Dirt or impurity or unclean - ness therefore is something, someone, some action that is not in its right place... It is out of place!

In the story before the Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus and his disciples are accused of being impure by the religious custodians of the time. Jesus in a play on words is able to show it is rather the practice and teachings of these teachers that are out of place, because these teachings come from an internal attitude that breaks down the wellbeing and unity of the community rather than holding it together.

It is ironic then that Mark moves on directly to the story of Syro-Phoenician woman.

So how is the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman out of place?

This happens on three different levels:

1. **Gender:** This is obvious. Women in the Mediterranean world of the Near East in Jesus' time did not simply engage in conversation with men. Women, honourable women, were not allowed to appear in public without a male escort (either her husband, father, brother or son). Yet here was a woman on her own in

conversation with Jesus, a man, and there is no mention of anybody else in story, no other man. It is important to note here that to engage in an action like this does not bring dishonour to the woman herself, but rather to the man with whom she is speaking and to her father. Both Jesus and the woman are engaged in behaviour that is out of place. To make matters worse the woman was in another man's house as property could never belong to another woman. In fact she had now brought shame onto that household.

2. **Ethnicity/Race:** This is very obvious. Mark makes a huge thing about. He emphasises her difference "The woman was a Gentile, born in the region of Phoenicia in Syria." It was not permissible for Jewish people to be in conversation with Gentiles. To do so would mean that the Jewish participant in the conversation is defiled. Yet one could argue that it was not the woman who was out place when one considers this factor. In truth Jesus should not have been there, because a Jewish person should not be in a Gentile territory, let alone a Gentile house. In the case then it is Jesus who is "dirt", out of place.
3. **Politics and Economics:** Tyre is not a neutral place. For the Jewish locals of Galilee it was land from which they had been dispossessed. There was a bitter history of rivalry over the resources of the land and rich landowners on Tyre depended on the surrounding farming community, for their wealth. It was exploitative and oppressive. Although Mark only mentions it in passing there is a hint that the Syro-Phoenician woman might have belonged to this class of people, as Mark mentions that her daughter was asleep on a bed and not a mat or simply at home. Jesus again is in the wrong place as he should not be speaking outside his class.

Yet Mark often places Jesus in moments and incidents in which he is out of place, where he heals and engages with people who are on the margins of the community because of illness or the position they hold, like the tax collectors and prostitutes. As a person who claims to be speaking on behalf of Yahweh, Jesus does not behave like any of the teachers of his day. They upheld the boundaries that would keep the cultural identity of the people pure not Jesus who would push the definitions of these boundaries and challenge the validity of these rules. In this gospel, these encounters with people who are outcasts or on the margins would always cause conflict among the religious leaders and either wonder or hostility among the people. So what makes this story different from the others?

Mark always sets Jesus up as the person who breaks open boundaries. Jesus creates inclusivity; helps people who are voiceless find their voice and then places that voice within the very community that would have otherwise excluded them.

Jesus always seeks out the out of placers, the others - except in this story! Was this one boundary that no one would want to cross, one arena in which inclusivity was not an option? Now the very incident or story itself is out of place because it does not depict the pattern of Jesus' behaviour within the Gospel (or in fact all the Gospels).

This story becomes really awkward when one considers that to the audience of Mark's Gospel. Although scholars have a few different opinions, they generally agree that Mark was the first gospel to be written or penned, that Mark was writing around 70CE and that he was writing to a predominantly Gentile early Christian community (most probably Rome). How was this story supposed to help a community of followers that were struggling with tensions between Christians who were from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds? How was this supposed to strengthen and galvanise a community of believers that were probably facing the first throes of persecution? It is an awkward story. I would have left it out. It is definitely out of place if Mark was trying to build community.

So what is going on here?

Some scholars, like Bultmann say that the conversation between the woman and Jesus a witty exchange (apothegm) yet still the conversation does not sit well. Jesus' behaviour is out of place. His words are harsh, even if they were a part of a witty repartee. To call someone a dog within the cultural milieu of the Mediterranean world of Jesus' time was tantamount to the harshest terms that one can use in our time to insult a person. None of those terms would be appropriate for me to mention in this space or any other space because they are designed to attack a person's dignity.

There are scholars who have explained that the word that Jesus does not use the term dog (*kynos*), but rather the term *kynoria* (the diminutive), which means more like puppy or domesticated dog and so the insult is not that bad. Yet no matter what kind of dog the woman might be called, an insult is still an insult and in the broader canvas of the Old Testament the term dog is interpreted as a racist insult. Further Jesus does not use the term *kynoria* in a well-meaning way. By saying that to these *kynoria* should not be "thrown" the children's food, he is implying that these dogs are scavengers. Fighting, stealing almost the food that is not intended for them. This is an allusion to the tense political and racial tension that existed in Tyre at the time (dispossessed land, rich land owners taking crops of peasants to make them rich) and the deep racism that existed between these two groups at that time.

The woman however is intelligent, desperate for the healing of her daughter and has stepped across so many taboos and boundaries that the insult, no matter strong or weak, racist or not, would not deter her from her goal. Her retort is brilliant, she

repeats the term *kynoria*, puppy or domesticated dog. She does not argue for her equal place in society as it were as we might have been tempted to do. In fact she continues to use diminutive terms within the reply, for example: scraps become crumbs.

Instead she takes the term *kynoria* and places it in a different place - the domesticated dog, the puppy belongs under the table of its human master, not scavenging in the wilds. She moves the image from the outside to within working of the household. She moves the *kynoria* from being unclean and inappropriate to being clean and to belonging within the community.

In her word play the woman actually takes the place of Jesus in the Markan strategy of healing discourses. In other words, she becomes the one seeking out the boundary place and presenting a vision of a community that is inclusive so that the voiceless might find a voice and restoration within a community. She does this for her child, the one who is voiceless in the story. As such, the child's healing is not because Jesus proclaimed the healing or created the space for it, but because a Gentile, Phoenician, woman of a different class group from Tyre created the opportunity and the space for healing and transformation. A very inappropriate action indeed!

I would like to think that it was not only the child that was healed on this occasion but that Jesus himself was healed of the racial prejudice that would have seriously limited his role as Messiah. I would like to think that in this story two cultures were given the space to be healed from the dominant voice of prejudice prevalent within these cultures. The woman is a prophet, naming the issues that break human dignity and placing the voiceless in the centre of the conversation.

In fact further in the gospel, Mark uses other Gentiles to proclaim the Messiahship of Jesus when Jesus, himself, his culture and his disciples are unable to do so. It is Simon of Cyrene who carries Jesus' cross to Golgotha and the Roman Centurion who first understands fully what Peter and the disciples failed to grasp: that Jesus is truly the Son of God.

Contextualisation

The shock of the story for me is not that Jesus used a derogatory term but that a Gentile woman could, for a brief time, do what Jesus does - challenge the boundaries of an exclusive community, present an image of God that is bigger than what the dominant culture understands of power. She opened a space for the 'other' and the voiceless to find their place. It must have been a shock for the early church

with its complicated race and culture conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians to hear this story. The woman's conversation with Jesus allowed the conflict between Jew and Gentile to be aired so that her child and future expression of the church would not have to be captured by centuries of racial hatred and bigotry, another way was made possible, a community was given a chance to move forward.

It is uncanny that the prophetic voices to the church and to the human community, the voices that help us transcend our narrow mindedness, the voices that help us discern the mystery of what it means to be a people living Christ-like lives, come from unlikely places yet that has always been the pattern of scripture.

Where are these emerging prophetic voices to the church and to our dominant culture heard today? Where are those awkward moments, when we realise that actions and words are initially seen as out of place, unclean and dirty within our dominant culture are actually the words, actions and people that call us to heal our communities and restore dignity?

I hear the voices of environment, climate change, water scarcity being raised by the rural women in Africa and other parts of the world being raised in the midst of poverty and hunger to suits and priests alike.

I hear the voice of thousands of young women in our country, who every year join marches and sign petitions against child abuse and gender-based violence calling for the crumbs of attention from pulpits and politicians alike.

I hear the thousands of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people in our country and churches calling for an end to violence and discrimination towards their very humanity against slander of communities and churches alike.

And I suggest that maybe these voices, like the Syro-Phoenician woman, are invitations to open spaces for healing, transformation and a more inclusive future.