

Sermon – Sunday, September 27, 2009

11 AM

Mark 7:24-30

Seeds of Change – The Power of Imagination

As children we were all taught to use our imaginations. We received permission to create magical worlds out of mud and twigs and newspapers. We built forts out of pillows and sheets draped over furniture. We pretended to be a doctor or a musician or a president and we plodded around our houses wearing the too-big shoes of our parents or grandparents. We took our toys with us in old grocery bags – now they use backpacks that look like cars or dinosaurs. And we received permission to envision a world that was regularly visited by tooth fairies, Great Pumpkins and other benevolent friends who we could not see, but who we *knew* were there.

Somewhere along the way, though, conformity became the norm – didn't it? We learned to follow rules about how to sit at the dinner table, about how to walk through the hallways at school, about how to politely make a request. We learned that opportunities opened to us through alliances we formed – “networks” we call them now – and we came to see that people were somehow more comfortable around us when they could relate to us. We learned to stand behind choices that demonstrated that we had a firm grip on reality. See, somewhere along the way we start to color inside the lines. We began to select the appropriate colors from the Crayola box: of brown and black for hair, blue for the sky, green for trees. We start to see the world *as it is*, and in doing so we begin to accept *that* reality as truth.

In our scripture passage for today, we receive a picture of reality that although distant to us by thousands of years might seem familiar. There is a picture of a tired celebrity planning an anonymous get away with his entourage. There is the reality that this now famous leader's own back story comes complete with loss, conflict, and the frustration of having been misunderstood. Then there are those labels – and the reality that the labels of the time were the mortar and cement of barriers between people of different genders, ethnic groups, or religious affiliations. And then there is the reality of a little girl who is hurting, whose life is not her own, and there is the very real fear of a mother so desperate to make her well.

When our text opens, we get a picture of Jesus that seems a bit unfamiliar at first. In fact, it looks like Jesus is all tangled up in the limiting reality of the day rather than focusing on an awareness of the unlimited possibilities that he *knows* exist in God. When we start our passage, it looks like our Lord of Life seems to be going into hiding. Rather than preaching and teaching to all he meets, it appears that Jesus is sneaking off to the farthest reaches of the nation, hunkering down in someone else's home, trying to fly below the radar undetected. It seems as if he heads for the hills – quite literally – so that he cannot serve those he was sent to save.

But along comes this woman – another of scripture's unnamed women – who interrupts Jesus right where he is and lays her needs at his feet. In a desperate act she bursts into the home of Jesus' host and throws herself before Jesus, begging for assistance – and not for herself, but for her *little girl*. So for the second time, we encounter a side of Jesus that we don't quite recognize. Rather than healing at the drop of a hat as he usually does, he seems to split hairs with this woman over

whether or not he should take the time to heal her daughter – a Gentile. Jesus seems not only reluctant – even unwilling – to help, but he proceeds to engage in a banter with this unnamed mother that to us sounds insulting at best and loaded with racist slurs at worst. He likens this desperate woman, and her family, to dogs – the lowest of the low, the most unclean creatures around -- claiming that her daughter – her *child* – is not among the children that he has been sent to save. This is not the Jesus we know, is it?

It is hard to be sure about Jesus' response in this passage. His words seem so out of sorts that some commentators say he never said them. Yet others argue that perhaps we are reading the story of the human side of Jesus – a tired Jesus, a frustrated Jesus, a Jesus who knows that he can only do so much in a day – a Jesus who is struck by the reality that things are not going as well as he would have liked. They argue that Jesus is simply pointing out *fact* – that although he would like to help the woman and her daughter, that it simply wasn't what he was here for.

And then there are those who argue that Jesus is exposing the reality of the day – that in his words he is shedding light on the harsh injustice of the time; on the limitations of perception; on the divisions so artificially created yet so thoroughly enacted. By speaking them out loud he is pulling them out of hiding and bringing them into the light – and by giving the unnamed woman a chance to speak he is giving her the opportunity to voice the truth that the Pharisees have missed: that Jesus is the one who saves.

I can't help but wonder if Jesus acts out of character on purpose – so that this unnamed, outcast woman can be showcased. I wonder if Jesus steps for a moment into the

sidelines so that the unnamed woman in our passage can step into the limelight, her faith and her deeds then becoming an example for *us*. For in our passage this morning we encounter a woman who *refuses* to see the world as it is. For her, truth lies in the possibility of what *can be* rather than the reality of what is. We don't know much about her – not even her name, her past. She is only identified by labels – labels by which the world defines her: Greek, Woman, Gentile, Mother. Yet somehow this woman finds the courage to break the confines of her reality, refusing to accept the reality of her time as the defining truth of her existence. She simply *refuses* to accept the facts:

- that her daughter is afflicted by a demon;
- that help is unavailable to her because she, a woman, cannot approach a man who can heal;
- that healing is out of her reach because she, a Gentile falls outside of the circle of God's chosen family.

See, this woman knows another truth. She knows the *Gospel* truth in fact. She knows that God in Christ has so much to offer – so much healing, so much acceptance, so much forgiveness, so much love – that even the left-overs are enough. She sees the abundance of what Jesus has to offer and the abundance that Jesus can bring into the lives of those who love him. She knows who Jesus is. She knows that he is more than a teacher, more than a miracle-worker, even, and more than a great leader. She knows that *Jesus is the source of all possibility*. She knows that in Jesus a new future can be created – a new future that transcends the limits of the day, that overcomes the obstacles of her reality, that even can overcome

death and destruction. She knows that in Jesus, all things are possible.

Back to imagination. The woman in our story dared to imagine a new way. She dared to imagine a future that was not confined by the reality of the time. She dared to imagine that her daughter's affliction could go away; she dared to imagine that her voice might be heard; she dared to imagine that stereotypes and divisions might not matter in Christ who came to save. For her, imagination gave way to hope and hope gave way to action, and action gave way to transformation: a new reality was created.

Brothers and sisters, we are to learn from our sister's example – we must dare to put our imaginations to good use once again, to let our imaginations breed hope and to be empowered by hope into action. We too must dare to imagine that a better day will come and a better way is possible. We *have* to believe that the world can be made different in order to overcome complacency and the weight of the present reality. And we must reclaim the power of imagination. We must imagine the power of our own voices, united together to advocate for the needs of another whose voice goes unheard by many.

See, many of us know that things are *unacceptable*. We know the statistics – we know that in the US over 14 million children live in poverty and more than 9 million children are uninsured.¹ And if that is just the state of affairs for children in the richest nation in the world, we know that children worldwide are suffering. The global economic crisis, diseases such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, global and civil wars and a

maldistribution of resources ensure a reality in which billions go hungry and in which billions do not have adequate health care. Brothers and sisters – this is unacceptable.

We shake our heads when we see the commercials on TV, we nod in agreement at claims that something needs to change. But too often our action stops there. See, we have a hard time envisioning *our* role in the solution. We become too entrenched in the hard news of reality that we get bogged down by the gravity of the situation. We struggle to see how there could possibly be enough resources, enough time, enough people who are generous enough or wise enough to overcome the systems that foster such injustice. We focus on what *is* and what *is lacking* without looking ahead to what can be – to what should be. We get mired in the limits of our day rather than living into the abundance of the Gospel.

We are challenged in this text to believe that change is possible. We are challenged to imagine a day when *all* of the children in this world are fed; when *all* of God's children have access to adequate health care; when wars will end, when racial divides will crumble, when all will know the radical hospitality of God in Christ. We are challenged to imagine that we too can make a difference – that we can be part of the change.

It might be hard to see another way. The path may seem cumbersome, unwelcoming, and even dangerous -- it was for every prophet from Moses to MLK Jr. We may see a road paved in bureaucracy, international politics, economic agendas. But we are challenged to imagine something new – and to trust that in Christ all things are possible.

The road to change is paved first with a vision – a vision of what can be. Let us use our imaginations to see the world not only for what it is but for what it can be. Let us

¹ <http://www.childrendefense.org/helping-america-children/ending-child-poverty/>

imagine a world in which all children go to bed with full bellies, and awake to a world in which they have a chance at a good education. Let us imagine a world that is safe for our children: a world in which there is no war or violence; in which there is no abuse or neglect; no trafficking and no exploitation. Let us imagine a world in which every child, of every age, has access to health care – *good* health care. Let us imagine a world free of violence: where youth no longer solve problems through acts of violence on our streets and where nations lay down their weapons work toward peace. And let us be emboldened by this vision to work together for change.