



Jesus is Marginal – TouchPoint for August 12, 2020

Matthew 15:21-28 (MSG) Healing the People

²¹⁻²² From there Jesus took a trip to Tyre and Sidon. They had hardly arrived when a Canaanite woman came down from the hills and pleaded, “Mercy, Master, Son of David! My daughter is cruelly afflicted by an evil spirit.” ²³ Jesus ignored her.

The disciples came and complained, “Now she’s bothering us. Would you please take care of her? She’s driving us crazy.” ²⁴ Jesus refused, telling them, “I’ve got my hands full dealing with the lost sheep of Israel.”

²⁵ Then the woman came back to Jesus, went to her knees, and begged. “Master, help me.” ²⁶ He said, “It’s not right to take bread out of children’s mouths and throw it to dogs.” ²⁷ She was quick: “You’re right, Master, but beggar dogs do get scraps from the master’s table.”

²⁸ Jesus gave in. “Oh, woman, your faith is something else. What you want is what you get!” Right then her daughter became well.

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

It’s one of those weird passages in the bible we’re not sure what to do with. I mean, you almost want to apologize for Jesus and his attitude. It doesn’t fit with what we have been taught about him. It doesn’t fit with what we’ve believed about him. It doesn’t fit with what we profess about him.

The big problem here is that: Jesus doesn’t fit into the boxes I’ve put him in. Well, guess what? Take a number – you’re not the first and you won’t be the last. Let me put it to you this way: we didn’t crucify Jesus because he stayed in his box, in the lane we assigned him to.

So, the question becomes one that I brought up a few weeks ago: Are we more into a religion about Jesus? Who we think and say he is, our religious pre-conceived notions or are we more about the religion of Jesus? What he believed and taught. The way he lived. And where the Spirit led him during his years on earth.

Is it ok to say that? Is it ok to say that Jesus was “Spirit led”? Because that would imply, he didn’t always know where he was going. That would imply he needed direction pointing at various points in his life. If Jesus already knew everything that was going to happen, then what’s the point of being Spirit led? You don’t need to be led if you know everything already. But we have a couple of different points in the gospels where Jesus is led. Near the beginning of Matthew, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Near the beginning of John, Jesus is led by his mother to change the water into wine, against his initial inclination. And here in this passage, Jesus is led by a gentile woman, to move in a different direction.

Now before I even get to the implications of a gentile leading Jesus in a different direction, let me point out the fact that, as far as I can remember in scripture, the only two people who lead Jesus to change his mind were women. As my dad used to say, “Put that in your pipe and smoke it.” And I’m speaking mostly here to male patriarchy.

So, what does it mean, that a gentile, and a woman, leads Jesus back to himself – returns him to himself? In both this story and the wedding at Cana story, Jesus’ first impulse is to put principle over people. “My time has not yet come.” “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And it is these two women

who point him in a different direction. Return him to his mission of people before principle. Relationship before religion. Love before law. In fact, HIS greatest law is love. This was his mission and vision. That people came before rules. “*The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath.*”

So, what does it mean, that a gentile, and a woman, leads Jesus back to himself – returns him to himself? This woman is an outsider to the outsiders. She is lowest of the low. From a Jewish perspective, being a gentile is the worst. Being a female gentile is the worst of the worst. And yet it is here, out on the fringes, on the margins, that Jesus is returned to himself. That Jesus is led by the Spirit. That is what it means to be led by the Spirit, doesn't it? To be returned to oneself, one's place within the great Mystery. To find one's home within the greater whole.

And the fact that, in this story, it takes place in the region of Tyre and Sidon. Gentile territory. And it is a gentile woman who leads... well, it is almost too much to comprehend.

Out on the margins, meeting a marginal person ... Jesus is touched and led.

Father Gregory Boyle, a Catholic priest who works with gang members in Los Angeles, reflects on this passage by telling the story of someone asking him how he does it? What does he do to reach the gang members and what can this person do to reach them as well?

And Father Boyle replies, “For starters, stop trying to reach them. The question isn't, ‘Can you reach them?’ But ‘Can you be reached by them?’”

Father Boyle continues, “And that's exactly what happens in this gospel. Jesus is reached. He's altered. He sees things differently. He's modeling for us how we are supposed to be at the margins. And we locate this exquisite mutuality, where there is no us or them. There's just us. And that's the point. Somehow, we allow ourselves to be reached, and to receive the folks on the margin so that we can with God and Jesus imagine a circle of compassion. And then imagine nobody standing outside that circle. With God and Jesus, we seek to dismantle the barriers that exclude.”

You see, it is when we go out to the margins that the margins get erased. We don't go to the margins to make a difference. We go to the margins to be *made* different. We don't go to the margins to find others; we go to the margins and find *ourselves*. Because, let's face it, haven't you felt like you live on the margins? And if you say, “No, never,” then you must not have attended Jr. or Sr. High School.

We all feel like we live on the margins. And we keep trying to fit in. But even when we fit in, we don't feel like we fit in. And that makes it worse. Why do we look for unconditional acceptance in a conditional world? ... I'm just asking for a friend.

So, it shouldn't be strange to say that we find ourselves on the margins and Jesus finds us there as well. This is what Jesus finds at the margins. In the god-forsaken region of Tyre and Sidon. In a god-forsaken GENTILE WOMAN!!! There in that place, on the margins, and with that woman, Jesus is led by the Spirit and returned to himself.

Perhaps this is why Jesus says he can be found on the margins, “I was hungry and you fed ME. I was thirsty and you gave ME drink. I was in prison and you visited ME.” We don't go out to the hungry, thirsty and in prison to TAKE Christ to them. We go out to MEET the Christ. To be changed by the Christ in them. To be made different by the Christ in them.

We go out to be led by the Spirit that lives within them. Just as Jesus was. Look, if Jesus can be altered, changed, and redirected in his faith journey, why am I so closed to that possibility for me?

Why do I think, “I must make a stand? My faith must be unmovable.”

What difference would it make, if when I meet people who are different from me, my primary concern is not trying to make them think like me, but if my primary concern is listening for how the Spirit is leading me through them? What difference would it make?

Look, when what I believe becomes more important than the person standing in front of me, that is when I need to move to the margins and be changed. So, let me conclude with some more words from Father Boyle. Because, well, this whole touchpoint has been a quoting or paraphrasing of him.

“We go from here to stand with the demonized so the demonizing will stop. And we stand with the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away.”

In other words, you stand on the margins ... so that there are no marginal people.

In the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus stood with the denier, the betrayer and the cowards. He didn't marginalize them. He didn't demonize them. He didn't dispose of them.

And at the margins of denial and betrayal, he met them. And didn't just give them the crumbs that fell from the table. He gave them the full feast.

His body and blood. His very self.

Amen.