



University Christian Church – Austin

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The Woman Who Changed Jesus' Mind

Matt. 15: 21-28

Pentecost 14, a, August 17, 2008

In a month Becca and I will be taking a quick trip up to Kalamazoo to see our daughter, Marie, in her production of the play “A Chorus Line.” Marie loves acting and dancing and this play is the highlight of her young career. I have joked with her and the rest of the family that she inherited this ability from me. But the truth of the matter is that even though I was part of the thespian club in my high school I only ever had one acting part in one play and with it came the most humiliating moment of my high school years.

I was Charly in the play *Flowers for Algernon*. You may know that it's a story of a loving and lovable man with a very low IQ who is given an experimental drug which makes him intelligent and finally super intelligent before he reverts at the end of the show to his beginning state. At one point in the play, the newly intelligent Charlie has fallen head over heels in love with his teacher, Miss Kinnian, who he is ready to kiss for the first time. Truth be told, a classmate of mine, Barbara Kinowski, who was playing Miss Kinnian was a beautiful blonde and someone that I found very attractive, though I was far too shy to let her know that.

From the first time I read through the script, I had for weeks been dreading our practice of this scene. The day finally arrived and from the moment I awoke, I

could think of nothing else. So here it was, this first practice kiss with Barbara, I mean, Miss Kinnian, that was striving at some level to be more than just play acting. The pressure was building and we got to that part of the script. I gave her this unbelievably fear-drenched kiss. Frankly, it was a miserably poor facsimile of a kiss. I think the word “peck” would be a better description. I was so nervous!

Finally, after four increasingly devastating tries at doing this kiss in front of all the other actors and the stage crew in the play, that included half my friendship circle, and my kisses were NOT getting any better.... when my embarrassment had reached absolutely insurmountable heights, it got worse.

The director of the play, Mrs. C., furiously screamed at me as she was running up to the stage, “Marks, don't you know how to kiss a girl?” and to the utter surprise of everyone there – especially me- she pushed Miss Kinnian aside grabbed me, bent me backward and gave me this enormous big smacker, right on the lips, that set the whole place aflame in laughter.

I was mortified. Not only couldn't I kiss right, I had just been assaulted in front of my whole world, by my English teacher, who was older than my mother!

Perhaps that's why that same fall when I was a freshman in college and in my first philosophy class, I found this relevant passage in a newly favorite book entitled the *Zorba the Greek*, to be so compelling. Zorba's philosophy goes like this, quote "I've stopped thinking all the time of what happened yesterday. And stopped asking myself what's going to happen tomorrow. What's happening today, this minute, that's what I care about. I say what are you doing at this moment, Zorba? -- I'm kissing a woman. Well, kiss her well, Zorba! And forget all the rest while you're doing it; there's nothing else on earth, only you and her!"

All the history doesn't matter and all the plans and principles don't matter, either. There is Only this incredible moment. Fulfill this moment completely.

I'm betting that that is exactly the mindset of the Syrophonecian woman who cornered Jesus in the passage that Roslyn just read. Her daughter was in a terrible state. This Jesus had demonstrated that he had amazing powers that she just knew could heal her daughter. She was going to do whatever it took to get that healing. Even if he resisted on principle, because he was a Jew and she gentile, she would somehow, someway, get that healing for her precious daughter.

We all know that resistance, too. When you drive down the streets of Austin on days cooler than today, and you come to a red light at a traffic signal with your windows down and you are the first car in line at the light and to your left at a distance of 2 measly yards, is a man with a scraggly beard and the sun damaged skin with a sign and a penetrating gaze that is begging you to reach in your pocket and pull out a dollar or two to help him -- and to top it off, you've given out your last Handi-Pak from the Outreach Council, so it is going to be money or nothing.

How do you feel? Do you feel challenged to go beyond your own principle - - perhaps a principle that says "I don't give money to panhandlers because I don't know whether they will use that money to buy drugs or liquor or food." How did you feel when you had ignored the pleas of a brother?

Or you come to church and hear someone from that lectern or this pulpit challenge you to support a special outreach offering to aid hurricane victims or tsunami victims, how do you feel? Not so much how do you think, now, but how do you feel?

Because these feelings of challenge.... Challenge to respond are so powerful, and often so upsetting, odds are, that to cope with the never ending stream of requests for money coming at you in the mail and on television and in the newspaper and on the radio and in church, you have developed some kind of principle by which you determine when and perhaps what you will share. And those principles become the basis by which we do exactly what Jesus did in today's lesson.

Just like Jesus, we draw a line.

We circumscribe the area within which we will be generous and how generous. And we feel -- if not okay -- at least somewhat less guilty-- when we pass the offering plate by without contributing, or roll up our car window to silence the person beseeching us, and stay safely inside that circle we become comfortably numb.

It seems to me that's exactly what Jesus was doing in today's passage. He said to the Syrophonecian woman that she was beyond the pale of his immediate concern. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." That was the limit of his ministry....clear, precise, end of discussion.

But something powerful happens in this episode. And so many bible interpreters have been embarrassed by Jesus' words here and have tried to explain them away, saying that Jesus didn't really mean what he was saying, he was only testing the woman, prodding her on. Well, you believe that if you want to, but I see no need to defend Jesus here.

I know that we Christians have often quoted Heb. 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” We have implied by that Jesus must have been eternally exactly the same; that he didn’t grow into understandings and new perspectives like the rest of us hopefully do. We set Jesus up beside God and sing, “there is no shadow of turning with thee; thou changest not. . . . as thou hast been thou forever wilt be.”ⁱ But I tell you, friends, I LIKE the fact that Jesus changes his mind here, and not only changes it, but changes it 180 degrees! I like that fact that such a faithful and persistent woman in need can be the catalyst to lead even our Lord Jesus into a new assessment of his ministry!

You see, Jesus’ own life mission it up to that point was suddenly and dramatically changed. In the beginning he wasn’t even going to countenance such a ministry to those beyond his boundary, his “lost sheep of Israel.” But in the course of a very short conversation – in English, just two phrases, totaling 18 words- this persistent woman, this devoted mother, encourages Jesus to move from not thinking about it,

through thinking about it,

to actually accomplishing this healing ministry... at a distance no less.

Wow!

In that wonderful moment, Jesus forgot his weariness. Jesus let go of his carefully crafted boundaries. He grew up! Was the dialogue going on inside of Jesus like the one inside of Zorba the Greek? “What’s happening today, this minute, that’s what I care about. What are you doing this moment, Jesus? Tending

to the cares of a woman. Well, tend to her well, Jesus! And forget all the rest while you're doing it; there's nothing else on earth, only you and her!”

Was it Compassion for the woman and her daughter? Yes, of course, it was an expression of Jesus compassion...and it led him to trespass the very boundary that he had accepted for himself. But now, now he would no longer be just the Messiah of the Jews, but he was going to become the Light of the World. Jesus determined that he was going to become that expression of God's truth that knows no human boundaries.

Where is it that you draw your boundaries, your lines that you will not trespass?

Who is it that you feel obliged and honored and so very ready to reach out and help? Does it include your family? Certainly. Does it include your extended family? Your cousins, your nieces and grand parents? Of course.

How much farther does your circle of concern extend? Does it include your sisters and brothers in the church, many of them gathered here this morning? I hope so. If you have a hard time figuring it out, as they say, “follow the money,” that is, how you spend your money. That does a good job of showing what you really value.

So how broad are the limits of our compassionate care? How far beyond just our family will we expend the limited capital: money, emotional attention, and time, that we are to be stewards of?

I don't know about you but I get uncomfortable when I hear a story of Jesus that challenges me to push out the limits, to push out the boundaries of those for whom I will care.

>I don't want to have to care for the whole world.

>Lord knows I won't be able to help them all.

>>>>>But this story and its insistent lesson won't leave us alone.

I think the challenge for us this morning is uncomfortably clear. No matter what principles and guidelines we have set up to define how we will give ourselves, it is going to be in those moments when we –like Jesus-- open ourselves to the outsider-- that we enter into the true adventure of faith.

ⁱ From “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”, 1923 hymn by T.O. Chisholm and W.M. Runyan.