

Asking and Risking So Much More*

Mark 7:24-37

September 8, 2024

St. Paul's, Brighton, MI

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

We are invited to call openly for change while staying in relationship with those for whom we seek change, so that those hearing this sermon will think of ways that they may do this in their own lives.

I've been thinking a lot about audacity lately. About people who are willing to go beyond what is expected to change a situation they no longer find tenable. I've been thinking about individuals who are unable idly to tolerate the world as it is, and so risk taking action to alter current circumstances.

The Syrophenician, gentile woman whom Jesus encounters in the region of Tyre, is, if there ever was one, an audacious woman, who willingly violates the norms and expectations of the day to get help for her daughter. She is a mom. Her daughter is ill. Her daughter needs assistance. Jesus, so the rumors say, may be able to heal her daughter.

So she goes out of her way to find him.

Jesus is out and about-
and apparently is a bit tired
of all the people following him.
So he ducks into a house to lay low.

But, because she is looking for him,
and needs her world to change,
she
-sees him go into the house
—and forgoing all the customs
regarding Jews and Gentiles,
men and women,
abandoning the established etiquette
on not just barging into someone else's house,
her daughter is ill—
her daughter needs help
and her need
not social norms and customs
is what matters.
she sees Jesus slip inside
and—she follows.
She bows down low
and asks him

to please heal her daughter.
 Jesus attempts to blow her off.
 He says, in effect,
 I can't help you—
 I'm only here to help my people.
 Helping you
 would be like taking
 the special food set aside for the children
 and giving it to dogs.
 I'm not gonna do that.

WHOA...

(Please note this is not Jesus at his most pastoral. Or as scripture scholar Sharon Rindge says, "the Syrophenician woman seems to have caught Jesus with his compassion down.")

But the woman is unbowed. She is not put off. Instead, she tenaciously replies,
 "Sir,
 even the dogs under the table
 get to eat the children's crumbs."

"Even the dogs under the table get to eat the children's crumbs!"

WHOA—again.

That stops him—
 she's right—he's wrong.
 So, He says with admiration,
 because Jesus enjoys a poetic turn of phrase and a well-argued case,
 "For saying that, you may go—and
 Your daughter is healed."

The Syrophenician woman, audaciously seek a change in course, but not with malice—but with the intent of staying in relationship.

It is two very different types of actions to have someone point out the ills of a situation, and then walk away from it and the people in the midst of the issue.

Syrophenician woman, violates custom and asks Jesus for help.

He says, "No."

She questions his reasons and does not stand down.

He does not dismiss her, but rather listens, even though he's tired and he'd rather be alone.

He listens, engages, and changes his mind. Theologically it seems on this particular day Jesus is way more in touch with his fully human self, rather than (his) divine side.

What if we lived our lives this way? Rather than living mutely, passively with the unacceptable or anonymously calling for change and not engaging in the possibility of a connection and a relationship during and after the changes?

Who does this? Can we do this? Can we be faithful people who can name an ailment and then when rebuffed, can we graciously stand our ground and engage in a conversation, a dialogue where we listen deeply, pause, reflect some more and then respond. Not with malice but with an openness to hearing and being changed.

I want to offer a couple of names from history people who called for change and remained open to relationships.

Do you remember Ruby Bridges? The young African American girl, the youngest of black children to integrate the public schools in New Orleans, in 1960. Originally it was going to be a group of students who were going to integrate the local grammar school. In the end she was the only child who went. There are iconic pictures of a little 6-year-old girl walking between Federal marshals, through a phalanx of people screaming epithets at her.

Robert Coles, a child psychologist spoke to her a number of times during that agonizing year. He says, "She once told me she felt sorry for those people who were trying to kill her," Coles says. "I asked her, 'You feel sorry for them?' And she looked at me and said, 'Well, don't you think they need feeling sorry for?'"

Coles reflected, *"Talk about wisdom! And talk about moral intuition. I sat there stunned. He says, 'I was applying standard psychology, trying to help her realize that she was maybe angry at these people, and bitter and anxious, and she was telling me that she prayed for them. I was struck dumb and I was silent, because I had to reflect upon this child's wisdom.'"*

Audaciously, asking for change while staying in relationship, Ruby Bridges, a 6 year old girl, staying in relationship for people who threatened her life by praying for them. Every single day.

Does the name Hugh Thompson stand out to you?

On March 16, 1968, American troops slaughtered more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, most of whom were elderly or young women and children. Many will remember Lt. Cally's name, the officer who was eventually tried for overseeing the massacre, few remember Hugh Thompson, the young warrant officer, helicopter pilot who stopped the My Lai massacre.

While flying overhead—he and the men on his helicopter, saw what was happening. He immediately set his helicopter down between the US soldiers and the remaining villagers. He got out and told his American colleagues to stop what they were doing. And said, "If you do not, my men and I will open fire on you."

Thankfully he said, it never came to that.

Back at base he filed complaints, the army as you know tried to cover it up, eventually the reporter Seymour Hersh, broke the story. Hugh Thompson was excoriated by his colleagues for telling the story.

On the 30th anniversary of the massacre, Thompson went back to My Lai and met some of the people whose lives he had saved. "There were real good highs," [he said], "and very low lows. One of the ladies that we had helped out that day came up to me and asked, 'Why didn't the people who committed these acts come back with you?' And I was just devastated. And then she finished her sentence: she said, 'So we could forgive them.'

Imagine being one of those villagers... staying in relationship seeking an opportunity to forgive. Imagine being Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson, and being willing to go back to that village and meet with the people on that 30th anniversary.

Needing change, calling for it, and staying in relationship. Hugh Thompson was denounced by many of his colleagues, but he stayed in the army until 1983. In 2003 and 2005 he gave lectures at West Point and the Navel Academy on Professional Military Ethics.

Calling for change and staying in relationship.

The Syrophoenician woman, Ruby Bridges, Hugh Thompson, people, people maybe like you and me, wanting a better world. Where do we fall, you and I, in the ability to name a wrong and then stay in relationship...

Amen.