

“Perspective or Prejudice”

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Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Mark 7:24-37

*A good reputation is better than much wealth; high esteem is better than silver and gold.*

*The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord made them both. Proverbs 22:1-2*

Let us pray... O God,

Martin Luther King said a person ought to judge and be judged

on the content of one's character and not for superficial reasons.

Teach us to be open to the good that is in others

and to listen past the fears and hatreds that would keep us deaf to  
how you are still speaking.

Amen

The week I was at Chautauqua, I found a community filled with opportunities for  
many wonderful encounters, informative lectures,  
and entertaining concerts and performances.

Each morning in the large meeting area called The Amphitheater,  
there was a major presentation with two experts in their field speaking  
on the theme of the week.

This would be preceded by a protestant-style service of worship  
featuring the guest chaplain of the week for Chautauqua,  
The Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence.

Dr. Carter Florence is the Peter Marshall Associate Professor of Preaching  
for Columbia Theological School in Georgia,  
and is a contributor to the 'Day 1' sermon resource website.

She is a preacher who is not afraid to deal with those difficult texts of the Bible –  
especially, those embarrassing passages in the Bible that would tend to  
scandalize us into saying, “Did Jesus say that?!”

She was preaching about the story of how Jesus met 10 lepers  
in the borderland between Samaria and Jewish Galilee.

He tells them to go and see a priest and as they depart, they joyfully discover  
they are healed.

Only one returns to say thankyou and he happens to be a Samaritan.

Jesus then says,

*“Weren't ten made clean, and the other nine,  
where are they?”*

*Was none of them found to return and give praise except 'this foreigner?'"*

Jesus is clearly not politically correct in this instance.

As Anna Carter Florence says,

*“... even the most familiar texts can do backflips on you...”*

She does point out that Jesus was talking to the disciples  
and presumably not in the presence of the Samaritan.

Willard, p.2

Well, we have such a text today that has

Jesus speaking in less than complementary terms  
directly to someone who was not Jewish.

It is one of those embarrassing statements of Jesus  
that has preachers and Sunday school teachers doing 'backflips'  
trying to explain his 'politically incorrect' behavior.

There are various interpretations of this text:

- a) Jesus was testing this woman to see if her faith was authentic,  
so his language was harsh on purpose.
- b) Jesus was testing the disciples to get them to recognize their own prejudice  
while demonstrating his message of salvation was for everyone.
- c) Jesus was as biased as his fellow Galileans  
and it was he who learned a lesson in humility from this woman.

Any one of these works for me...

The first two presume that Jesus' Divine nature was operating to give him  
omniscient knowledge of what was required in this encounter  
to provoke the woman and to shock the disciples  
to come to a faithful insight.

The third option presumes he was just as Human as any of us –  
that Jesus himself could be just as biased as any of us.

How these texts are read can also shape their meaning.

After the Syro-Phoenician woman's clever reply,  
Jesus seems very abrupt as if he was angry and wanted her  
to just be on her way having made her point.

Peevishness, however, does not seem to be part of his character  
nor is it evident in how he behaves in other Gospel stories.

I am more inclined to think he would have laughed at her 'hutzpah'  
or at least smiled to have been bested by her humility.

He then graciously affirmed this woman's daring appeal,  
with the promise that her daughter would be healed...

He tells her, 'go your way' – with no challenge to convert  
to anything other than being a Syro-Phoenician.

This is not simply tolerance; Jesus is open to and affirming of the woman's spirit  
of courage and compassion and willingness to coexist  
as she sought help from him as a Galilean Jew.

Willard, p.3

Jim Wallis is the founding editor of the progressive Christian magazine, "Sojourners" and I heard him speak about how he once took a Bible and cut out all the words referring to poverty and economic justice. He apparently used an exacto knife, because he said all that was left was just shreds. He was making a point that poverty and justice were major themes in the Bible and therefore, an important concern for God.

We can certainly agree that there are many themes that are likewise threads of continuity throughout the Hebrew and Christian scripture and traditions like 'love', 'forgiveness', and 'salvation'. There is even a "green letter" Bible that makes the case for how the 'environment' is such a concern for God – and ought to be for us, too. I am convinced that the problem of 'prejudice' is likewise a major theme and that getting 'perspective' is a major goal leading to salvation.

It is there right in front of us with Jesus as a Galilean who grew up as a minority in the Samaritan town of Nazareth. It is there right in front of us in his first missionary efforts in the northern areas of Samaria and Galilee where he encountered situations that called him to challenge the prejudicial attitudes of his neighbors – and apparently, his own, too. It is there right in front of us when his neighbors ran him out of his hometown of Nazareth for pointing out their prejudice. He had shown them that God's favor was not just for them, but that God had helped a Lebanese woman who was widowed at a time when there were many widows of Israel and that God had healed a Syrian soldier with leprosy rather than any of the lepers in Israel.

It is there right in front of us that there were times that Jesus contended with 'prejudice' throughout the Gospels, and not just in terms of ethnicity or religion. We can see how Jesus challenged the attitudes of his culture towards women that are only now, two millennia later being recognized by our society which is having a rippling effect for women's rights around the world. We can also see that Jesus was someone who simply dared to be different and that he himself suffered for it.

Still, our Gospel lesson today suggests that Jesus, too, was susceptible to prejudice through the cultural bias of his community. He used a slur that was probably in common use by Jewish Galileans to describe the descendants of those hated Greek conquerors who desecrated Solomon's Temple three centuries before.

Willard, p.4

Perhaps he had heard family and neighbors call such ‘foreigners’ as ‘dogs’, just like any of us if we grew up in homes and neighborhoods, hearing and perhaps using such words about other groups of people until we became challenged to become more ‘politically correct’.

At first glance, it seems odd that the lectionary would link this story about the Syro-Phoenician woman with Jesus’ healing of a person who was ‘deaf and had an impediment in his speech’.

But the healing of the deaf person, suggests an antidote to the sin of prejudice is to ‘be open’ – ‘Ephphatha’.

To safeguard ourselves from hardening our hearts – and in order to understand others and where they are coming from, we must first be willing to listen and be open to what people have to say.

We may not agree or even like what they say, but we have to be brave enough to listen before we make a judgment.

There is no getting around judgment in this world, but there is a difference between the necessary discernment of what is right or wrong, of what is just or unjust behavior, and the convenient dismissal of someone just because of who they are, just because they are different from the social norm.

Caitlynn Jenner who was born Bruce Jenner is a perfect example of someone who is challenging us to listen up for a voice that is rarely heard – the voice of transgender people.

We are being called into a brave, new world of a ‘new normal’ and the United Church of Christ as a Christian community of God is poised to help the wider church and community make that transition.

We are still living in a world that is often unwilling to see past its parochial, tribal, family, or even sports affiliations.

Administrative clerks may bottleneck justice for a time on the basis of their beliefs – no matter how sincere, but if we believe that God is on the side of love and truth, then we expect that eternal things will not be thwarted in the long run.

Denying LGBT people the right to marry, like the continuing defiance of waving Confederate battle flags – like preventing African-Americans the right to vote are injustices that have been exposed for how they hurt people.

It can only be when the moral debate finally acknowledges the pain that is caused to people we get to know and care about, that attitudes can move from “prejudice” to “perspective”.

Willard, p.5

Our tradition tells us that Christ died for our sins,  
but perhaps we need to see his sacrifice in this way –  
that Christ died because of our sins  
and that we must start choosing the things that lead to life  
and stop choosing what leads to death.

So, one of those sins we need to repent from – or turn around from, is ‘prejudice’,  
as in how we pre-judge others – and how we pre-judge ourselves, too.  
Jesus modeled that kind of turning around by listening  
to the Syro-Phoenician woman and her hearing her plight  
eventually to help her daughter.

Jesus called people into new life – he called them into a more authentic life,  
by daring them to accept whom God created them to be.  
God through Christ is still doing that, still calling us  
to give up what is false and hurtful – sinful, that is.  
God is still calling us to recognize we really were created good  
and we need to accept ourselves as God accepts us,  
so that we can accept others for who they are.

Here is something I came across while visiting the home of  
my friend, Jim Papile, an Episcopal priest of Reston, VA.  
It is an inspirational message which was on the wall of their guest apartment –  
written by a friend, but it is in a voice as if God were saying this...

*‘I want you to feel healing when you walk on my sand,  
at the edge of the water.  
I know you feel free and have a sense of the universe  
and all its miracles and glory.  
I want your perspective to feel  
balanced and nourished.  
I want you to take that feeling with you, in your life in your self to the world  
and give yourself love and acceptance.  
My waters are refreshing and vibrant  
yet calming and safe to you...’*

*Win Stephenson Summer 1990 Creative Journal Class*

If we are listening, we can hear that God is still speaking...

Amen

*Our first scripture lesson this morning is Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23  
and comes from the Common English Bible.*

*The Book of Proverbs is an example of “Wisdom” literature  
that is meant to be practical advice for living.*

*Notice that it is not directed at any particular cultural or ethnic group,  
except to imply there is a universal responsibility to care  
for those who are poor...*

[1] A good reputation is better than much wealth;  
high esteem is better than silver and gold.

[2] The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord made them both.

[8] Those who sow injustice will harvest evil;  
the rod of their fury will come to an end.

[9] Happy are generous people,  
because they give some of their food to the poor.

[22] Don't steal from the poor, because they are poor.  
Don't oppress the needy in the gate.

[23] The Lord will take up their case  
and press the life out of those who oppress them.

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words...*

Mark 7:24-37

<sup>24</sup> And from there [Jesus] arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

And he entered a house, and would not have any one know it;  
yet he could not be hid.

<sup>25</sup> But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet.

<sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophoeni'cian by birth.

And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

<sup>27</sup> And he said to her,

“Let the children first be fed,

for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”

<sup>28</sup> But she answered him,

“Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.”

<sup>29</sup> And he said to her,

“For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.”

<sup>30</sup> And she went home, and found the child lying in bed,

and the demon gone.

<sup>31</sup> Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decap'olis.

<sup>32</sup> And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech; and they besought him to lay his hand upon him.

<sup>33</sup> And taking him aside from the multitude privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue;

<sup>34</sup> and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him,

“Eph'phatha,” that is, “Be opened.”

<sup>35</sup> And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

<sup>36</sup> And [Jesus] charged them to tell no one; but the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

<sup>37</sup> And they were astonished beyond measure, saying,

“He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.”