

Maybe There's Another Way
A sermon based on Mark 7:24-37 by Angie Witmer
Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ
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It was a turning point in our relationship: our first real argument. The first real “make it or break it” kind of thing. Now you might think that we would have argued about religion or kids or something like that. Trust me, we eventually got around to having some serious conversations about those kinds of issues, too—but our first fight was about something really important: laundry.

We weren't married yet. I was at Paul's house. He wasn't home. I thought I'd help out with some things that needed to be done...I thought I was doing him a favor. He came home while I was loading the washer. Instead of the words of gratitude I expected to hear—something along the lines of, “Wow, honey, you didn't have to do that! Gee, thanks!” I heard something more along the lines of panic. “What do you think you're doing?” were his exact words, if I remember correctly. Evidently, I was doing the laundry wrong.

Now, I'm not going to go into great detail with the “he said/she said” thing, but I will tell you that one of us grew up believing that the proper way to wash clothes is to fill the machine with water and detergent and then add the clothes. The other of us believed that the correct laundry procedure meant putting the clothes in first, then adding the detergent and finally the water.

We laugh now when we talk about it, but at the time it sure wasn't very funny. It doesn't feel so good when someone challenges the rituals and habits that you learned early on, have practiced all of your growing up year, and now (as an adult) know that these are the true and right ways of the world: things like washing clothes and folding towels and hanging toilet paper. We've discussed those things, too, by the way. Lots of times.

One thing I've learned in the midst of all of these heart to heart chats is that there comes a point where I need to make a choice: am I going to dig my heels in and insist on my way? Or am I willing to open myself up and possibly discover—at the risk of embarrassment, maybe—that there might be another way, maybe even a better way, to get the job done?

That's the scenario Jesus is faced with today. Before we get to his dilemma, though, a little back story:

In case you've forgotten, Jesus is a Jew. That's a pretty important thing to remember here because Jews are the chosen ones of God. God told them so. Over and over and over again. Growing up, Jesus would have heard the stories of his ancestors, the promises made to them, their struggles and the blessing God gave them through Abraham and Isaac and on down through Joseph and Moses. Jesus would have known beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was special—not because he was the Son of God or the Messiah or the promised one or anything like that. Nope. He would have known he was special and chosen simply because he was a Jew. He was hand picked. Beloved. Story after story after story at home and at school and in the synagogue and at temple would drive that message home: the Jews were "it".

And if Jesus grew up knowing in his heart and soul that the Jews were "it", he also would have grown up knowing that the Gentiles were not. They were pagans. Unclean. People to be avoided and left alone. Not because they were poor or diseased. They weren't—well they weren't any more poor or diseased than the next guy. These people were icky simply because they didn't follow the law. They broke the hundreds of sacred laws in the Torah all the time. Everyday, actually. They ate the wrong foods. Wore the wrong clothes. Heck, they probably even washed their clothes the wrong way, too. In any case, the point would have been loud and clear to Jesus: non-Jews were no good. Period.

With that in mind, let's wander into today's story. Here we find Jesus on a much-needed vacation. Right before today's events, he's been quite busy teaching and preaching and arguing and performing miracles: for example, he managed to feed thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Shortly after that, he found himself in the middle of a hot debate with the Pharisees about the definition of clean and unclean. Basically Jesus was pointing out that all of the rules that the Pharisees insisted on following were getting in the way of letting them really follow God's command.

All of that work—being "on" all of the time—took its toll. Jesus was exhausted. He needed some time to recharge, breathe, collect his thought and get ready for whatever would be heading his way next—and you could bet that something good was, indeed, headed his way. To do that, though—to get some time off—was going to be a challenge. He would have to find a place where no one would recognize him, where he was sure to be left alone. That wouldn't be easy. People seemed to find him wherever he

went. So the only place he could think of was really quite unthinkable: Tyre. Gentile territory. Pagan country. Not necessarily ideal, but at least he could pretty much guarantee that there wouldn't be any Jews there bugging him for a favor or a hot debate. It would be darn near perfect.

And it was. Darn near, anyway. The one thing that Jesus hadn't counted on was the fact that the word about him was spreading throughout all of the area, to Jews and non-Jews alike. So imagine his surprise when, in the middle of a house in the middle of foreign territory in the middle of his vacation, a WOMAN barges in begging for help.

A WOMAN. Here's something else you might want to know about the culture of that day: women were nobodies. Less than nobodies, even. They weren't supposed to speak, especially in public, especially to men in public. To do so meant severe punishment, anywhere from a public flogging to being cut off from your family, destined to beg in the streets the rest of your live long (or short) days.

And yet, that didn't stop this woman. She barges into the house, bows at Jesus' feet, and starts asking—pleading, really—for help. Her child is sick. Unclean, she says. She's heard about Jesus and what he can do...would he please, please, please help her out?

Jesus isn't very Jesus-y in his initial response to her. Granted, he does acknowledge her presence—something that he didn't have to do. He could have ignored her and had her arrested. Instead, though, he speaks to her and says something like, “Hey! Who do you think you are, barging in here like this? I'm here for the children of Israel. They get first dibs on grace and miracles and stuff like that. You're a dog—go away. Leave me alone.”

Oh, Jesus. That is not cool. Whether you're having a bad day or not, that is not cool.

His lack of coolness doesn't phase her, though. Or at least she doesn't let it show if it does. She comes right back at him with this: “Hey, buddy. Call me whatever you want. I know I'm not a Jew and I'm not chosen and special or anything like that. But I also know that you can do something about this situation. I've heard about you. And if what I've heard is true, you don't really believe that the Jews are the only ones worthy of your time and effort. Or at least that's what you've been saying. Even us dogs are worthy of a little something, right?”

Oooooohhhhh. Slam. She got him. And she knows it.

Jesus knows it, too. He knows that what she says is the truth. He's been saying the same thing for quite awhile now: he just gave the disciples a little lesson on abundance with the loaves and fishes and thing. Scarcity isn't an issue. There's plenty to go around. He believes that is true.

And then he had that verbal sparring match with the Pharisees where they argued in favor of all of their hundreds of rules and Jesus countered with the argument that all of those laws about things that are clean and unclean and all of the habits and rituals they stick to just "because that's how they've always done it" actually get in the way of serving God and living a complete life. He believes that's true, too.

So now he's got a decision to make: does he save face, dig his heels in and insist on getting his way? Or does he take a good, hard look at what he's doing here and open up to the possibility—maybe even at the risk of embarrassment—that maybe—just maybe—he's made a mistake and there might be another way?

Remember, he has every right to ignore her. Every right to have her arrested and punished for daring to break the rules. Every right to get back to his vacation and his life. No one would have thought anything about it if he would have put her in her place and laughed the whole situation off. People would have supported him in that action, actually. That's the way things are done, you know.

But he didn't. Instead, Jesus stopped, listened, opened up, and let an unclean, Syrophonecian, pagan, icky, annoying, pain-in-the-butt woman remind him who he was and what he was here for: to bring healing, wholeness, and life to everyone. Everyone. Regardless of traditions or rules or any of that. He was here for everyone.

Wow. That's a moment right there. A monumental moment. A pivotal, transformative, life-changing, life-giving moment.

It's stories like this one that make me want to follow this guy. It's stories like this that make me want to be a Christian. Jesus is human. Sure, he's God—he does stuff like sticking his fingers in people's ears and making them hear again. He makes people whole in ways they never imagined possible. But

he's human, too. He goofs up. He makes mistakes. And because of that, I find it easier to try and be more like him.

Let's face it—if all Jesus did as God Incarnate was float around six inches off the ground and glow with a heavenly aura and talk in big words above our heads while an angel choir sang in the background, this whole Christian-thing would be unbelievable. Unattainable. I could never be like that Jesus, so why try?

But this Jesus? The guy we meet in today's story? I have some hope that I can do that. I have some hope that we can all do that—not just the goofing up part (I think we have that skill down pat), but more of the learning and growing part. Like Jesus, we can keep opening up to the truth about who we are and what we are here for, too. After all, we are all here for the same reason that Jesus was here: to bring healing and wholeness and hope and light into the world in ways big and small.

Love God. Love each other. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, that's the job you've been given. That's the command.

Jesus was right: sometimes our rules and our habits and our traditions get in the way of doing our job. Our prejudices, our ambitions, our fears, our anxieties, our need to be “right”—those things keep us from opening up and living, really living.

Maybe there's another way. Amen.