

“A Different Side of Jesus?”

Mark 7:24-37

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In the mid-1990's, Michael Jordan was potentially the most famous man in the entire world. He led the Chicago Bulls to six NBA championships. He starred in a movie with Bugs Bunny. There were Nike commercials where people young and old said they wanted to be “like Mike.”

In the summer of 1996, I was working for a computer reseller in Chicago, and one of our big customers was The Quaker Company – you know, Quaker Oats, cereals and snack foods. They were a big enough customer that my job was to work full-time in the customer's office building in downtown Chicago, managing our day-to-day relationship.

At the time, Gatorade was owned by The Quaker Company, and Michael Jordan had just signed a new contract with Gatorade. They had a big event planned to celebrate his new contract, with a huge tent set-up in the parking lot next to the building. The event was just for the Gatorade folks, so I wasn't invited, but I went out to the tent anyway to see what was going on.

As I was walking down the sidewalk, there he was, coming my way. It was Michael Jordan with his good friend Ahmad Rashad. I walked right by them, trying not to stare or otherwise look uncool. But as cool as it was to be so close to Michael Jordan, what amazed me most was the reaction of everyone else on that downtown street. All traffic had stopped. All heads were turned. People were gathering along the sidewalks calling out, “Michael!!! We love you Michael!!!” All this happened as he was walking the distance of less than one city block.

It was then that I began to wonder if I really would have wanted to be “like Mike.” I mean, how does this guy have any sort of normal life? Is this what it's like wherever he goes? If so, then how does he buy groceries? I guess he probably doesn't! He probably has someone do that for him. How does Michael Jordan go to a movie theater to enjoy a movie? He probably doesn't. He probably has a movie theater in his house. He probably has to remove himself from all public life in order to stay sane. When I gave it that kind of thought, I'm pretty sure that I don't really want to be “like Mike.”

The scene on that downtown Chicago street is what typically comes to my mind when I read about the crowds that consistently surrounded Jesus. In our text this morning, Jesus is doing his best to get away from the crowds. He and his disciples left the area of the Sea of Galilee and took a 40 mile hike out of town to the coastal city of Tyre. Tyre was away from the Jewish territory and into Gentile territory. In today's text, Jesus says his message is first for the Jews and then for the Gentiles. So why would he leave the towns where the population is mostly Jewish and head for a primarily Gentile town? I think it's because he wanted to truly get away from things.

The text says that Jesus “entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”¹ He wanted to get away from the crowds. He needed a break. Have you ever felt like that? You just want to get away from it all. Spend some time by the sea. Get away from the demands that are constantly weighing on you. I think this is what Jesus was trying to do. And what happens? The text says that he couldn’t escape notice and a woman comes and asks him for help. Even when he’s trying to get away from it all, they still find him.

You’ve had something like that happen too, haven’t you? I know I have. When you’re on vacation, but you get a call from work. When you’re relaxing at home and you get a telephone call that you just don’t want to deal with. Those times when you’re trying to just get away from it all, and somebody finds you and interrupts your escape.

How do we handle it when something like this happens? Do we embrace these situations with open arms and say to the person who is interrupting us, “Sure! I’ll stop whatever I was doing just so I can help you!” I admit that’s not the first thing that would come to *my* mind. Sometimes we might grumble about it, but do it anyway. And there might be times when we aren’t so nice to the person who’s intruding on our personal time. We might snap at them or say something unkind to them.

Now imagine that we don’t have today’s Gospel lesson fresh in our mind. Imagine that we haven’t heard today’s story before. What would we generally expect Jesus to do in a situation like this? How would Jesus react? What would Jesus say? We’ve been presented a general concept of Jesus that would probably cause us to think that Jesus might just welcome the interruption. Jesus is just so patient and kind. He’s a nice guy, and, oh yeah, he’s perfect, isn’t he?

Well, if you need Jesus to be that kind of perfect, you may have a hard time with the way I’ve been thinking this week about today’s gospel text. You see, the way I read the scripture, Jesus doesn’t seem to embrace the interruption. The picture of the scene that keeps going through my mind is of a physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted Jesus being bothered once again when he’s gone out of his way to get a little R&R, and I think he loses it a little bit here. Jesus doesn’t respond with a big hug and some warm words. No, Jesus insults the woman when he responds to her! He calls her a dog. Well, that’s not exactly true. He calls her sick daughter a dog. That’s even worse, isn’t it! It’s certainly a different side of Jesus that we’re seeing in today’s text.

Now, if you’re uncomfortable with this way of thinking about today’s text, you’re not alone. At least half of the commentaries I read on today’s text made an extended effort to explain how Jesus really wasn’t insulting the woman. They say that the form of the word dog that is used in the text refers more to a lovable house pet – a lap dog – rather than the mangy, wild mutts that were commonplace during the time and that were not loved at all like we love our dogs today. Those kind of commentaries also tried to show how Jesus was just testing the woman’s faith as he often did in other stories of his interaction with people.

¹ Mk 7: 24b

I'm not going to say that those commentaries are wrong, but they seem to start with the assumption that Jesus could never have had a bad day, so they work to find some explanation for his behavior. What if we started from a different beginning point? We know that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Just how fully human are we willing to allow Jesus to be? Could he be human enough to have a bad day and get caught – on the record – saying something that, in retrospect, he would have rather not said? That's the concept of Jesus that I've been playing with this week.

How many of us have been in the situation where we say something, and immediately we wish we could just grab those words and shove them right back into our mouths? For some of us, what we said made it on the record too. I think of Christian Bale's tirade last summer that kept him in the media for weeks, or Richard Nixon's taped conversations. Bet they wish they could have a do-over for those conversations. Maybe that's where Jesus was in this scene.

I've been coming at my understanding of Jesus from the starting point of the patient, nice, perfect Jesus all my life. And so I try to understand everything about Jesus from that initial frame of reference. So it's been interesting, and I'll admit, kinda fun this week to imagine Jesus from a different angle. I'm not willing to give up the idea that Jesus was perfect though, because the Bible also says that Jesus was without sin. So, if I go with the idea that Jesus was having a bad day in today's text, how do I maintain a perfect, sinless Jesus?

Mark's Gospel account is the one in which Jesus is most human. There is no miraculous birth narrative of Jesus in Mark. Mark doesn't record all the miracles of Jesus that other Gospels like John do. In theological terms, Mark has a low Christology, meaning that if Mark were to place Jesus on a spectrum from being more like or closer to God (high) or more like or closer to humanity (low), Mark would place Jesus on the lower side.

One commentator I read this week helped me understand that to be fully human, Jesus must have had to deal with the challenge of the fullness of the human condition. If that is true, did Jesus have to experience regret for bad decisions? Could Jesus have been human enough that he snapped at the woman and said something he didn't really mean? If so, is Jesus still perfect?

I guess it comes down to how we define perfection. Maybe there's another way to understand the concept of perfection. Is perfection only attainable if we never get frustrated or say an unkind word? If so, then I think perfection is pretty much unattainable in this life. But I have this desire to be perfect as my heavenly father is perfect as Jesus instructs in the Bible. How do I accomplish this.

If Jesus was perfect, and I believe he was, how am I to understand this passage? I think we need to understand perfection a little differently. Here's how I see Jesus as perfect in this story. It's a way that helps me feel like perfection is attainable.

Yes, Jesus says something rather unkind to the woman. That's not ideal, but it is quite human. It's what Jesus does after that that helps me understand how he was perfect. He doesn't just move on with his life, he continues to engage the woman. When she comes back at him with a very reasonable argument, he listens, and he admits his mistake. He grants the woman her wish. He heals her daughter. He recognizes his error, and he doesn't let that get in the way of a future relationship with the woman.

How many times have we done something wrong, said something we probably shouldn't have, and then left the scene, never to return again. We cut off the relationship, maybe because we're embarrassed about what we've said or done, maybe because we're still holding a grudge because of what the other person did to us.

The challenge Jesus poses for us in today's text is to transform those situations when they happen to us. Sure, there will be times when we'll say or do things in the heat of the moment that probably don't represent the best of who we are. We may say or do things that we later regret. The comfort we get from this passage is the knowledge that Jesus himself may have actually done the exact same thing. If you've had a bad day and said something you didn't really mean, maybe Jesus can say to you, "I've been there. Done that. Learn from my mistake."

And that's the challenge we get from Jesus in this passage. That's the invitation to Christian discipleship from today's text. When that unfortunate harsh word slips out, let's not make that the final word in the conversation. If we are to be followers of Jesus, we must be willing to admit our mistakes. We must not let the guilt of what we have said or done overtake us and we must not hold a grudge. Instead, we must be willing to stay in relationship with those who may have gotten on our nerves enough that we said what we said.

As followers of Jesus, we need to be people who are always willing to open the door to reconciliation and forgiveness so that relationships can heal and grow. In that way, we can become closer to being perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. In that way, we can become partners in bringing the Kingdom of God to bear here on Earth. And that is, I think what Jesus is calling us to do – to bring the Kingdom here on Earth, one person at a time, one relationship at a time.