

EVANGELIZING OUTSIDERS

9/5/21 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 18 (B): Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146; ~~James 2:1-10, [11-13]~~, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

When's the last time you felt like an outsider—like everyone else was part of the “in crowd,” and you were out on the edge looking in? Maybe some of you feel like outsiders in the Episcopal Church. You come here for community, but you still can't figure out why so many people bow before they sit in the pew, or cross themselves at every mention of Christ.

Sometimes I feel like an outsider as I serve on the diocesan Standing Committee. It seems like everyone else knows all the church canons, and I'm only aware of a couple of them. Maybe you feel like an outsider in your new job, where everyone else is younger than you, and you haven't quite cracked the code on all the acronyms everyone's using. There are many ways one can feel like an outsider.

A few weeks ago, for instance, I went to see the movie called: “CODA,” which stands for: Children Of Deaf Adults. The story features a deaf couple and their two kids. The son, who's also deaf, is a young adult trying to come into his own. The three of them are often outsiders because of their inability to hear what people are saying, or the knock at the door, or the sirens indicating they should pull over.

The movie does a tremendous job of demonstrating what that might be like. There's even several minutes of absolute silence, giving us the parents' experience of watching their daughter sing on stage without hearing a single note.

The second child—a teenage girl—isn't deaf, so she has her own feelings of being on the outside. The rest of the family relies on her to constantly serve as their translator, going to medical appointments with them and negotiating business deals for them. So, she's often on the outside because she has little time to just be a kid.

This morning's Gospel reading features healing stories of two people who were very much outsiders. Like the movie, one is a deaf man. Not only would he have been on the outside for the ways I've already described, but the stigma of such a disability came with a lot of judgment in ancient times. A deaf person in that context would have been shunned, considered unclean, and pushed to the margins of society.

Likewise, the Syrophenician woman is identified as a Gentile, meaning she was seen in that context as a foreigner; again, someone without any status or value in the society in which she found herself. And, yet, even though she was in every way considered an outsider, she boldly comes forward to ask Jesus to heal her daughter.

Now, this story has been very controversial over the years. Some scholars insist that this is an example of Jesus fully experiencing humanity—so much so that he seems to momentarily lose track that his compassion should be for ALL people—as he refers to the woman and her family as dogs.

But I think maybe Jesus did this on purpose! I can't help but notice how similar this exchange with the Syrophenician woman is to his interaction with the woman at the well. In both encounters, Jesus and the women are definitely aware it's very out of the ordinary for him—a Jewish man—to be in dialogue with an unaccompanied, foreign woman. But, still, in neither case does he make any move to have them dismissed.

Instead, Jesus engages each of the women in a way that calls forward intelligent and informed responses. The ensuing conversation moves each woman from seeker to believer. The same thing happens with the hemorrhaging woman. These outsiders come seeking a simple healing, but, instead, Jesus's line of questioning deepens their faith!

So, this tactic of Jesus is a lot like the method the music teacher in the movie, I mentioned, uses on the teenage girl, who had never done anything away from her family, but then signs-up for choir class. As the music teacher realizes how talented she is, he's aware that she's holding back for some reason.

The teacher basically becomes, what could be considered, antagonistic. He gets in her face, egging her on to make the ugliest sound she can, since she's worried about sounding ugly. He yells after each of the guttural sounds she makes that they aren't that ugly, until, finally, she screams at the top of her lungs. Then, the teacher gets very quiet and says, "Okay. Now sing." And, of course, she sings beautifully from a new place, deep within herself.

The music teacher knows he has to open up the girl to her full potential. He has to get her to push past her own self-protection; he has to wear her down, so that she can be more fully herself. That's what Jesus is doing with the Syrophenician woman; he pushes her in a way that makes her claim the truth of God's love—that even a few crumbs, or bits, of God's love is more than enough for anyone.

So, as she is pushed, the Syrophenician woman claims God's truth and her faith is deepened. Then, Jesus, like the music teacher, gets quiet and says, "Yes. Yes. Because of your faith, your daughter is healed."

This is Jesus's form of evangelizing. To take that in, it might help to hear the current definition of evangelism being used in the Episcopal Church, which is: "Evangelism is seeking, naming, and celebrating God's presence in our lives." Jesus heals people so that they can name and celebrate God's presence in and among them.

So, I'll ask you again: where have you been feeling like an outsider, and how might you drop your guard around some of your vulnerabilities, so that you might name and celebrate God's presence in your life?

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth

in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

Psalm 146

Hallelujah!

Praise the LORD, O my soul! *

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, *
for there is no help in them.

When they breathe their last, they return to earth, *
and in that day their thoughts perish.

Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! *
whose hope is in the LORD their God;

Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; *
who keeps his promise for ever;

Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, *
and food to those who hunger.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; *

the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

The LORD loves the righteous;
the LORD cares for the stranger; *

he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

The LORD shall reign for ever, *
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.

Hallelujah!

James 2:1-10, 14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and

lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7:24-37

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."