

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & Outsiders"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 7:24-37
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 8, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

As the school year has gotten started, there's been a lot of excitement in the air for kids moving up to new grades and beginning at new schools, as well as getting back together with old friends, and engaging again in some familiar routines. For most kids, the back-to-school time is exciting and interesting. For some kids, though, all that commotion and hubbub causes a lot of stress and anxiety. And probably for most kids, there's some fear of not fitting in and feeling left out. As kids age into junior and senior high, those emotions and concerns intensify. No matter what city or school district—public, charter, or private school—it always seems there are certain types of kids who group up together. There are the athletes and cheerleaders, the academics and teachers' pets, and the musicians, artists, and actors. There are the homecoming royalty and student body officers who are clearly recognized as the insiders, and then there are those other students who, at least to themselves, feel like outsiders.

In this back-to-school season, we've been working our way through a series of sermons I've called "Jesus 101." Using the Gospel of Mark as our text, we've been exploring the basics of who Jesus was and what that means for our Christian faith. So far, we've seen Jesus calling disciples to join him in sharing the good news of the gospel message. We've seen him healing the sick, offering merciful interpretations of the law, and calming the watery storms of life. We've seen Jesus teaching large crowds and miraculously satisfying their hunger. Last Sunday, we overheard Jesus talking to some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. Jesus explained to those religious insiders that spiritual health doesn't come so much from strict obedience to traditions and rituals as from a heart purified by God. And now, at the end of Mark chapter seven, we find Jesus traveling away from

that Jewish inner circle. I invite you to consider these verses with me. Let's see what we can learn from these two stories about Jesus and outsiders.

1—JESUS WENT OUTSIDE GEOGRAPHICALLY

Let's begin by stating the obvious. Jesus traveled geographically to where the outsiders were. For Jesus, traveling to Tyre would be kind of like us traveling west to the Oregon coast or maybe even to San Francisco. It's possible that Jesus had hoped to enjoy some quiet, meditative time on the Mediterranean beach. We don't know if he went there for a vacation, a spiritual retreat, or to hide from Jewish authorities who were already mounting their attack against him. But peace and quiet is not what Jesus found there. Because Tyre was a fairly large port city on the edge of the sea, it had a lot going on. People came there from other places to trade their goods, so there was a diverse mix of people. It wasn't mostly Jews like it was back in Jerusalem or Galilee. So it was no wonder that Jesus was discovered and visited by a Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin. Jesus had definitely ventured outside the beltway. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, Jesus wasn't in Kansas anymore. He had traveled to the outer limits.

Then, as we can see from the second story, Jesus didn't stay in the western region of Tyre. Next, he traveled around the east side of the Sea of Galilee to the region of the Decapolis. That area was known for its 10 Greek cities. Even though the 10 cities were urban, from the perspective of Jesus the Jew, that area to the east was another kind of hinterland. It was far from the center of Jewish faith and worship. Jesus had entered a strange and foreign territory.

Some Bible scholars wonder if Jesus really did go to these non-Jewish places, or if the gospel writers many decades later were actually describing the spread of Christianity that occurred mostly after the fall of Jerusalem, when Christians were forced to scatter around the Middle Eastern region. Either way, however, the point of the gospel stories is to say that Jesus and the faith he generated weren't limited to the Jewish people in the central region near Jerusalem and Galilee.

Jesus and his followers traveled to places where they encountered people who were outside their normal circle and experience. Jesus went where the outsiders were.

2—OUTSIDERS CHALLENGED JESUS

What we see next in these two stories is that those outsiders then challenged Jesus. The Syrophenician woman especially did that, as she expanded Jesus' understanding of whom he should help. Maybe you were surprised to hear Jesus refer to the woman, her daughter, and people like them as "dogs." It wasn't a pet or person-friendly reference. All these centuries and many translations later, we can't hear the tone of Jesus' voice or see the expression on his face. But we can tell that his words were not a gracious inclusion. Jesus' retort was the kind of put-down that separates people between "us" and "them." It was the kind of remark that drew a line between who was important and who wasn't. It was the kind of statement that clarified who were insiders and who were outsiders.

But the woman wouldn't let Jesus get away with such an automatic and prejudicial statement. Instead, she spoke her truth. She stood up for what she believed was right. Her daughter was afflicted, and it wasn't just the children of Israel who needed Jesus' ministry and salvation. She insisted that even the dogs under the children's tables should be granted the opportunity to eat their crumbs.

And Jesus accepted the woman's challenge. He listened to her, became more aware, and expanded his understanding of human need. Because of the strength of her words and conviction, Jesus was changed for the better. His heart was opened, so that—in the next story—Jesus was then able to open the ears and tongue of the man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Even though that man was an outsider by his location in the Greek region of the Decapolis, and even though he was an outsider because of his disabilities, Jesus' own heart was opened to go there and help him.

On the west side of Washington Blvd, going from Harrisville toward North Ogden, there's a billboard that I like. It shows two girls, maybe twins, with their hair in double ponytails. The message on the billboard says, "The other person might be right. Listening. Pass it on."

It seems to me that the message of these stories of Jesus and outsiders is that we Christians should do a better job of listening to other people. Not just to people who are just like us, but even to people who are different. Not just to people who have a lot of wealth or status, but even to people whom we, at first, might consider less educated, less sophisticated, or less worthy than us. Maybe we can learn something from them. They might be right. Like Jesus, we should open our ears, our minds, and our hearts to those who are outside of our usual circle.

3—OUTSIDERS INITIATED & RECEIVED HEALING

And then, finally, what we see in these two stories of Jesus and outsiders is that the result of their interactions was healing for all involved. Because of these interactions between Jesus and outsiders, Jesus himself grew in understanding and ministry ability, the daughter of the Syrophenician woman was freed of her demon, and the man who had not been able to hear or speak well gained those abilities. When insiders interact and share power with outsiders, and the wisdom and perspective of outsiders reshapes the understanding of the insiders, wonderful things can happen for everyone. Insiders and outsiders learn to value one another, stop hoarding resources, and miracles occur.

Sometimes in our political discourse, we hear people accused of flip-flopping on their positions. If they said or did things one way before, but now they sing a different tune, that's considered inconsistent, opportunistic, and generally bad. But sometimes, we need to change our minds. When we encounter new people and new situations, when new information comes to our attention, and when we have new experiences, it would be tragic if none of those things made any

difference in our thinking. Growth happens when we listen to others and recognize their shared humanity. We can be healed of our bigotries and biases.

No, it's not easy to engage with people and situations that are different. Even for Jesus, the most perfect person who ever lived, it was his natural default position to respond in a rote and prejudicial manner. To dismiss the woman and her daughter's needs was self-protective of Jesus' time and resources. To insult her and keep her at arm's length was a way to guard his people's way of life, beliefs, culture, and perspective as being superior. Especially when we're tired and stressed, it's human nature to pull back and protect our identity and our people.

But to the woman's credit for her verbal sparring skills and to Jesus' credit for his receptivity, Jesus allowed himself to be improved, to be shaped, to become a healthier person. By listening to outsiders, a miracle of healing occurred within Jesus that allowed him to heal others. I hope it can be that way for us too.

CONCLUSION

The first line of one of our hymns prays, "Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us."

The second verse goes like this:

Teach us, O Lord, your lessons, as in our daily life
we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith.
Teach us to care for people, for all, not just for some,
to love them as we find them, or as they may become.*

May we, like Jesus, open our hearts to those who are different from us. May we be able to learn and grow and help and heal. That's the lesson we learn from Jesus and outsiders.

*Fred Kaan, 1974, c. 1975 Hope Publ. Co.