

“Whose Mind Is Changed?”
Preached at LPTS Chapel
March 4, 2016
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Texts: Isaiah 55:7-9; Mark 7:26-30

I read Ayn Rand’s book *The Fountainhead* in ninth grade. Inspired by her portrayal of spineless, sycophantic Christians, I became an agnostic. For a while I continued to go to church but I refused to sing the hymns. This drove my mother nuts. Then in tenth grade I read Rand’s book *Atlas Shrugged* and I stopped going to church altogether. But by eleventh grade I had discovered that Rand’s philosophy was a very lonely one. No one around me managed to achieve the level of rugged individualism that she told me I should be looking for in potential friends or love interests. So when invited by acquaintances to attend the local Presbyterian youth group, I accepted—to expand my social circle, nothing more. But something amazing happened in that youth group: I met real Christians who weren’t anything like the pathetic ones I read about in Rand’s novels. The intelligence and loving kindness of my new friends in that youth group—both the young people and our adult leaders—forced me to rethink everything I had come to believe about Christianity and changed the course of my life. I committed myself to Christ.

In my case, conversion happened because I had deep, personal encounters with Christians, whom I thought I knew something about, only to discover that I didn’t really know them at all. Isn’t it often the case that such personal encounter is what catalyzes change in the way we view others? We think we have things all figured out. We know who black people are. We know who white people are. We know who gay people, straight people, bi and trans people are. We know who Democrats, Republicans, U.S. citizens, immigrants are. We know who

Southern Baptists are. But then we encounter someone in the fullness of their personhood, and everything changes. The world shifts its axis.

A shift like that appears to happen in Mark's story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman. We usually think of Jesus as the one who changes others—but in this remarkable story *he* is the one who is converted to a new way of seeing.

Let me describe the scene. Here Jesus is in the city of Tyre, on the edge of Gentile territory. He is trying to stay hid, but word is spreading that he is out and about, and people are looking for him like tabloid paparazzi. Then this Gentile woman comes to him and asks him to exorcise the demon from her daughter. And he refuses. He turns her away with an insult. He says, "Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He isn't even civil to her! He's like that political candidate spying a protester and ordering, "Get her out of here!" *Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.* At that time Jews despised dogs. Dogs scavenged, and since they ate unclean food, the image of dogs often served as a metaphor for the Gentiles. Jesus' ministry to this point has been for Jews; this Gentile woman and her kind are no better than a pack of scavenging mongrels. But the woman is undeterred by Jesus' rejection. She doesn't go away. Instead, she seizes Jesus' disparaging remark, reshapes it, and boldly hands it back to him.

This passage shocks us (or it should). First, how could Jesus be so incredibly rude? Second, how and why could he come to change his mind? Was he that uncertain about the scope and nature of his mission? It is a scandalous story no matter how you look at it! Many interpreters have wrestled with these offences. Some have said that Jesus was referring to "puppies," not dogs, and so is not being derogatory; or that Jesus was joking; or that he intended all along to grant the woman's request and was just teaching the disciples a lesson; or that he was

speaking in a kind of riddle designed to prompt the very insight she offered. None of these explanations satisfies me; I think they are all solutions born of embarrassment.

I like NT scholar Brian Blount's suggestion that we must seek understanding of this incident by focusing on Mark's *narration* rather than on what really did or did not happen in the life of the historical Jesus. So the question is not "what was Jesus up to," but "what was *Mark* up to." Mark apparently composed his Gospel from oral traditions circulating in the decades after Jesus' resurrection. Blount suggests that the oral traditions were like unmarked family photographs jumbled in a box. Mark put them into order as best he could, but *getting the theology right* was more important to Mark than getting the historical sequence right. So, rather than try to determine exactly when or why or where this incident with the Syrophenician woman took place, or if it took place in just the way Mark recounts, we should ask, rather, how it fits into Mark's larger story. What was he trying to accomplish by telling it the way he did? (See Blount, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, 116-27)

Answering the latter question requires us to imagine ourselves back into Mark's historical moment. Before Mark was writing his gospel, back during Jesus' earthly ministry and in the very first years after his resurrection, Gentiles had not been part of the Christian movement. At that time Christianity was not even called "Christianity"; it was a *Jewish* renewal movement focused on a *Jewish* messiah, for *Jews*. But decades had passed by the time Mark was gathering those family photographs together and putting them into an album, and the situation of the church had changed dramatically. Gentiles were now flowing into the church in great numbers. So, do you see Mark's dilemma? How could he show that this embracing of Christianity by the Gentiles had been foreseen and authorized by Jesus?

Mark handles the problem in chapters 6 through 8 of his gospel. In chapter 6 he showed Jesus feeding 5000 Jews, with twelve baskets left over. In chapter 7 he has Jesus declare all foods clean, thereby eliminating the barrier to table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

And then we come to the story of the Syrophoenician woman, which is part of this larger section of narrative. It is a two-level drama, telling about events in Jesus' day but also about events in Mark's own day. You read a two-level drama in high school if you studied Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. Ostensibly the play was about the Salem witch trials in the late seventeenth century, but allegorically it was about the drama of McCarthyism unfolding before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the early 1950s. *Animal Farm* is another two level drama with the allegorical level of the story inspired by events in the Russian Revolution and the period of Stalinist rule. The story of the Syrophoenician woman is an analogous two-level drama, about a woman who changed Jesus' mind, but also about the entry of Gentiles into the church in Mark's own day.

So whose mind is changed? Who sees in a new way? *Jesus* sees in a new way. Note that Jesus changes his mind in Mark's telling not because of the woman's *faith* but because of her *word*. In her response, the scavenging dogs become house pets. Jews did not keep dogs as pets, but Greeks and Romans did. The woman sketches an image of house dogs permitted to enter into the place where the family dines and eat the broken pieces that fall from the table. Even this image strikes us as demeaning, but something more is going on in Mark's narration. As I mentioned, a short while before Jesus had multiplied loaves enough to satisfy five thousand Jews, and there were twelve baskets full of broken pieces left over. It is as if, in speaking of crumbs that fall from the table, the woman is reminding Jesus of what he should have known already: The grace channeled through him is abundant enough to satisfy *everyone*. There is

plenty of bread! All may be fed! "Ah, ha!" Jesus responds. "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." And from there he goes on to feed bread to four thousand more people, possibly symbolizing the Gentiles, with much left over.

Whose mind is changed? The minds of Mark's first readers must have been changed. Through this story Mark offers a word of admonition to Jewish-Christian readers, insisting that Gentiles have a share in the eschatological blessings, not at the end time but *now*. Mark also admonishes Gentile-Christian readers: their numbers may be greater, but let them remember that the Jews were first in freedom—the freedom that Christ offers. It is by the grace of God that Gentiles share in these blessings. But, whether to Jews *or* to Greeks, God shows no partiality and neither should the church. The lesson here is much like that of Romans 9 to 11, where Paul describes the great mystery of Gentiles' share in the blessings. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" Paul exclaims in Romans 11. "How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways!"

Whose mind is changed? Perhaps it should be our minds. Perhaps we are the ones who need new ways of seeing. I know I do. I am not so worried about the relation of Jews and Gentiles in the church, because that is an issue whose time is mostly past. But I am worried about plenty of other Christians here in the U.S. who (I am pretty sure) are getting it wrong. And while on the one hand I praise God for all those believers coming into the church in Africa and South America and elsewhere, if I am honest sometimes I feel anxious because I foresee myself and other good, Bible-loving liberals like me being shut out—shut out of the public eye, shut out of the policy making, shut out of the church's future. I expect the Jewish Christians felt the same way when they saw those hordes of Gentiles coming in with all their Gentile food and Gentile

habits and Gentile sensibilities. Clearly I need to be as open as Jesus was when he heard God's word of abundance being spoken through this Gentile woman.

What would happen if we took our lead from this story, and found new ways of looking at Christians outside the circles that we ourselves privilege? (Footnote: If I had time for another sermon I'd ask what would happen if we found new ways of looking at people who are *not* Christian—but that's for another time.) What would happen if we decided that there is more than one way of being a good Christian? What would happen if we chose to believe that there is enough grace to go around? What would happen if we stopped automatically judging our own way to be the best? What would happen if we decided that Jesus provides enough bread to feed not just social-justice-doing Presbyterians or perfection-seeking Methodists, but also incense-burning Orthodox, tongues-speaking Pentecostals, Bible-thumping Baptists, Pope-admiring Catholics, and rapture-preaching dispensationalists? What would happen if we decided that Jesus provides enough bread to feed not just North American Christians but also South American Christians, African Christians, and Christians from every other continent and nation?

Affirming the wideness of God's mercy and the boundary-breaking nature of God's vision does not mean that we abandon working for the Gospel as best we understand it. Such affirmation does not efface the differences among us, including our differences of opinion about how God wants us to live in the world. Such affirmation does mean, however, that we stop thinking we have the mind of God to judge who is acceptable in God's sight. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Holy One. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Affirming the wideness of God's embrace does require us to be open to relationship with others who are quite unlike us, and open to seeing how the light shines through them, as the

light shone through that Gentile woman so long ago. We may find that such encounters disconfirm our prejudices, catalyzing change in the way we look at the world and the way we look at God.

The feast we are about to share at this table reminds us of God's abundance. The broken bread offered to children of God from every race and ethnicity, every culture, every denomination, every gender or sexual orientation, every political persuasion is the body of Christ broken for us, that we might have a new vision of life. (Imagine....) The vision is not our vision but God's vision, a vision of love and grace so abundant that it encompasses even our enemies—a vision that utterly transcends our comprehension. At this table we are truly brothers and sisters, differing from one another in countless ways yet all sharing the one loaf, the bread of life broken for us. With joy let us share in the feast that Christ offers us!