

Proper 18, Year B[Isaiah 35:4-7a](#)[Psalm 146](#)[James 2:1-17](#)[Mark 7:24-37](#)**Stepping Over the Tracks**

Every town has an “other side of the tracks,” literal or metaphorical. Most often, like in our still very segregated South Louisiana, the boundaries of the tracks create distinctions between people and entire communities. I remember growing up in Crowley that almost all the African-American folks lived in West Crowley. The more integrated, but economically underprivileged section of town was South Crowley. The geography held a literal boundary between peoples and cultures, namely the railroad tracks. They’re still there today, and those distinctions remain. Back then even our phone numbers perpetuated the distinctions. Most of my middle and upper-class white friends had 783 prefixes and lived on the North or East side of town. Everyone in South or West Crowley was 788. Even getting a person’s phone number would (and still does in many places) tell you something about their real estate. And the first rule of real estate, as every agent will tell you, is location, location, location.

One needs to follow this same first rule when reading the story of the Syrophenician woman: location, location, location. It’s hard to understand what’s going on until we note that Mark is so concerned with telling us Jesus has gone away to the region of Tyre, and then later to Sidon and the region of the Decapolis. Mark’s trying to tell us that Jesus is leaving Jewish territory, and is moving closer to Gentile regions. Jesus, the good Jew, has just crossed the tracks and gone to the wrong side of town. Everyone knows Jews and Gentiles don’t mix, and in this region Jesus’ Jewish presence

might even lead to danger and open hostility.¹

The passage opens with Jesus on the other side of the tracks, and Mark writes, “He entered a house and *did not want anyone to know he was there.*” Now, in one sense, this is a common Markan statement. Jesus often “seeks privacy or anonymity” in Mark’s gospel.”² He was probably just trying to get some time alone. Yet, it’s a striking statement in the context: “He did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Have you ever felt embarrassed to be somewhere? Maybe a little afraid or ashamed to be there, worried that you might be seen? Maybe you felt it in a home that was not up to your socio-economic standards, and you wondered if anyone you knew saw you go inside. Maybe you felt it while driving through a part of town where you did not feel safe and you reached over and hit the automatic door lock. I wonder if Jesus felt something like this over in Tyre. We say Jesus was fully human, and was subject to temptation in every way, just like us. Being tempted is not the same as giving in to temptation. If he felt a kind of awkwardness about his location we could certainly relate to that and forgive him for it. It’s a human reaction.

Geographical location isn’t the only focus here. There’s also the *social* location of the Syrophoenician woman—a Phoenician woman from Syria, interesting to think about as we see many Syrian refugees on the news crying out for a place to go—who discovers Jesus’ presence, and who turns out to be the real boundary-breaker.³ Here is a foreign woman, also described as “Greek” which means she was religiously and ethnically non-

¹ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina, ed. Harrington, Daniel J, vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 232.

² Donahue and Harrington, 232.

³ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Women’s Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 356.

Jewish. In this first century society her sex, nationality, and religious affiliation places her at enmity with Jesus. What's shocking is that by coming to Jesus this woman approaches "a strange man on behalf of her family." Anyone of the day would have considered such an act to be "unconventional," if not outright inappropriate and offensive. Such things were the responsibility of a father or other senior member of the household. This woman's *social* location, her cultural context, is enough to cause some scandal, but her behavior is over the top. And Jesus lets her know it in words that even the most ardent Christian has to find a little embarrassing to hear coming from the Lord's mouth: he disdainfully calls the woman and her daughter "dogs."⁴ Jesus is not just calling her and her daughter dogs, but also comparing all the non-Jewish, all outsiders, to dogs.⁵

At such a statement it would have been understandable for the woman to shrink away, to allow Jesus' words to stand. Instead, she presses forward, and she does so to her benefit. This is actually a time in the gospels when Jesus is beaten in an argument. And he's not beaten by some scholarly religious type, but by a lowly woman acting inappropriately against societal norms. She deferentially calls Jesus "Lord," but boldly and cleverly twists his metaphor to her advantage, twists it to be a metaphor of inclusion rather than exclusion. She essentially says to him, "You are Lord, and you are a Lord who will feed everybody because that's the kind of Lord you are."⁶ Touché, says Jesus, and so what started as an unexpected, unwelcome, inappropriate encounter on the other side of the tracks, turns into a moment of healing, a moment of inclusion and boundary breaking, and mercy trumps judgment. Jesus may have had a very human reaction to the

⁴ Tolbert, 356.

⁵ Christopher Bryan, "Unit III - A Look at Passages from Mark," lecture delivered to BIBL 511: New Testament I class, February 22, 2007, University of the South School of Theology, Sewanee, TN.

⁶ Bryan.

woman initially, but his response was divine, both of which tell us who Jesus is.

The Lord we claim, Jesus of Nazareth, breaks through our barriers. Jesus breaks down the distinctions we make and opens up to us new life, new possibilities, and new ways of hearing and seeing the world and the people around us. In the kingdom of God, location, location, location—whether geographical or social—is all one and the same. Jesus forces us to question the labels we place on the people in our lives, and invites us to see all places and all peoples as prime real estate.

The Christian church has always been about drawing the circle wider because she comes back to realize again and again that the Bible teaches us to do so, particularly in the New Testament. Take a look at our patron, Paul. Stories like this one of the Syrophenician woman are the very reason Saul was so zealous in his persecution of Christians. Do you see that window in the back of the church? It's of the stoning of Stephen from the book of Acts. Remember that story? That's Saul standing there holding the cloaks of the men lifting the stones over their heads. Why would he do this? He was threatened by the thought of his people being put on equal footing with the people on the other side of the tracks.

The Episcopal priest and writer Chuck Robertson explains it well. He writes, "To Stephen . . . Jesus had made the temple and all it represented irrelevant, breaking through the exclusive boundary between Hebrews and Hellenists, Jews and Gentiles. If this dividing line is erased, Saul realized, there will be nothing to protect Israel from gradual assimilation into the surrounding heathen culture and eventual disintegration. To Saul, therefore, the very existence of Israel is at stake. This made Stephen a dangerous man,

Saul believed, and this Jesus whom he proclaimed infinitely more dangerous.”⁷ No wonder they had him killed, and no wonder Saul stood by and held their coats. That same Saul would later literally “see the light,” would receive the new name Paul, and would eventually write to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Many boundaries we human beings build to make ourselves feel safe and superior. We human beings seem to have a built in need to try and make ourselves, our ways of thinking, our ways of living, better than whatever group we perceive as “other.” I’m reminded of old Mrs. Ruby Turpin from Flannery O’Connor’s 1965 short story “Revelation.” O’Connor describes her thusly:

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most [black] people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and [her husband] Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were [black] people who owned their homes and land as well.⁸

As you can see, Mrs. Turpin thinks very highly of herself, and spends a lot of the story muttering about others under her breath as she speaks sweetly to them in that “bless-your-heart” kind of way. She says prayers thanking Jesus that he did not make her like *those* people. She’s good at justifying herself before God and man, and coming out on top in her own mind. It’s a funny story because it rings so true. We all think we’re the ones who

⁷ C. K. Robertson, *Conversations with Scripture*, ed. Frederick W. Schmidt, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2010), 47.

⁸ Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 491-492.

have it together, and that surely we're the ones Jesus was talking about saving. That's why, despite our protests to the contrary that we're all welcoming churches, most churches are largely made up of similar people, socially, racially, and economically. That's why Dr. King's words from over 40 years ago still apply, that the most segregated hour in America is 11:00 am on Sunday morning. I wonder if what we've constructed is exactly what Jesus, the boundary breaker, had in mind.

There is a letter in the bulletin explaining to you why today The Episcopal Church is participating with the African-Methodist Episcopal Church in "Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism Sunday." The letter reminds us that "On June 17, nine members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, were murdered by a white racist during their weekly bible study. Just a few days later at General Convention in Salt Lake City, [The Episcopal Church] committed ourselves to stand in solidarity with the AME Church as they respond with acts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice." By participating in this small but powerful ecumenical gesture of prayer and action today we remind ourselves of our obligations as Christians to all of our sisters and brothers, particularly those who are different from us. We remind ourselves of Jesus' example and his call to Paul and to all Christians to draw our circles wider.

I invite you to read the letter, maybe while you wait for your turn to come forward for communion. As we say the confession of sin together in a few minutes, and as we pray the more penitential Eucharistic Prayer C, I invite you to open your heart for an honest inventory. We all have participated in the sin of racism in one way or another, either by things done or left undone—I know I have. Racism, it has been said, is our

shared national sin. It's not our fault, but it is our responsibility to work to undo the harm done by racism's reality. Racism is just one of the many ways that we, as human beings, draw boundaries to say who's in and who's out. Mark the Evangelist teaches us in the story of the Syrophenician woman that even God himself is not "unchanging or unresponsive" as we observe Jesus himself being transformed by his encounter with someone different from him.⁹ No, it's not just about racism, for there are many -isms that cloud the human heart, and which lay tracks we are wary of letting the "other" pass.

Remember Mrs. Ruby Turpin? She has a vision at the end of O'Connor's story, one that looks a whole lot like the scene of the multitudes in the book of Revelation. Right before her vision she prays to Jesus, "If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash then," she railed. 'You could have made me trash If trash is what you wanted why didn't you make me trash?'" O'Connor describes Ruby's vision:

She saw [a purple streak in the sky at sunset] as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of [blacks] in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.¹⁰

⁹ Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, *Feasting on the Word*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Year B, Volume 4*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Loc. 1852.

¹⁰ O'Connor, 508.

WORKS CITED

- Bryan, Christopher. "Unit III - A Look at Passages from Mark." Lecture delivered to BIBL 511: New Testament I class, February 22, 2007. University of the South School of Theology, Sewanee, TN.
- Donahue, John R. and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Sacra Pagina, ed. Harrington, Daniel J, vol. 2. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.
- Robertson, C. K. *Conversations with Scripture*. Edited by Frederick W. Schmidt. *The Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2010.
- Tolbert, Mary Ann. *Women's Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition*. Edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.
- Wilhelm, Dawn Ottoni. *Feasting on the Word*. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Year B, Volume 4*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.