

...As Seen on TV  
Mark 7:24-37 / James 2:1-10, 14-17  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
Labor Day Weekend / Ordinary 23

At Divinity School, two of my classmates were Greek Orthodox. There is a part of their theology that describes God as being immutable, unchangeable, that we cannot convince God to change God's mind on something. I disagree, for many reasons, and would argue with them, and then I would point out this story from the Gospel of Mark to them.

In it, a foreign woman challenges Jesus when He rejected her plea to free her daughter from a demon. She used a logical argument to challenge His assertion that He is not here for her yet, and so Jesus relents and heals her daughter.

I have a bit of a problem with how Jesus is depicted by Mark here. We know that Jesus did not judge regular people, just those in power. He associated and ate with tax collectors, tanners, and other unsavory types. He included women in His lessons. He told people to love their neighbors AND their enemies. To turn the other cheek. Treat others like you wish to be treated. And yet, Mark has Jesus making what is essentially a racist comment. He rejects her for being foreign and then dehumanizes her, by associating her with a dog. Taken in the context of a first century Jewish person living in the Holy Land, it was probably what they were thinking about the foreigners around them, but it is still very jarring to read this, because we expect Jesus to be above such things.

The point and message of that story is meant to open up Christ's message to the rest of the world. That woman was foreign, but believes in and has faith in the power of Jesus, so she, as a representative of all foreigners, of all gentiles, is shown to be acceptable. I spoke last week about kosher, how part of it was to visibly separate themselves from the foreigners around them, and so Jesus needs to break that preconception and bias of His listeners, to accept their fellow believers who just happen to be Gentiles, not Jewish. That was a very serious concern in the first century, which occupied much of the minds of the early Christian theologians.

The Letter of James is my favorite epistle, and happens to be very blunt and jarring like that part of the selection from the Gospel of Mark. The selection from James contains commentary on two subjects from the second chapter. The first relating in message to that encounter of Jesus with the foreign woman, the second on faith requiring actions.

The message that James wants us to learn is to not show partiality. Treat everyone the same, equally, no matter their income or appearance. We should not judge someone based on their appearance or on our own bias. Those who arrive early enough to claim a chair deserves to sit in the chair, not the floor.

I did not return there. The next week, I attended another church, wearing the same clothes. That church practiced “the passing of the peace.” I was not used to that and I usually feel awkward during that portion. I wanted to shrink down in the pew and hope that I was not noticed. But I was. One of THEIR deacons came up to me, welcomed me, and gave me a hug. In that instance, my awkward feelings were brushed aside, because of how welcome I was treated by them, who did not act according to a bias.

Earlier this past week, I was listening to epic music on YouTube, and one of the accompanying videos featured scenes from various science fiction shows, and I remembered how in the genre of science fiction, social commentary can be made in ways that in other genres are either incapable or not acceptable. Toss in aliens, space ships, or robots, and you can get away with putting something out into popular culture a lot more.

I've spoken before about Babylon 5, a show from the mid to late nineties, a story that is essentially the United Nations in space. The station's nickname was “the last best hope for peace,” while the opening credits explain, “it failed.” From the backdrop of failing to prevent interstellar wars, its themes were actually of redemption and forgiveness, with most of the main cast dealing with the horrible things they had done, their failures, and seeking ways to make amends. For this reason, it has been used in many church youth groups. The reboot of Battlestar Gallactica dealt with issues surrounding war, many of which paralleled current events in the news. They

could do this, because it was in space, and “the enemy” was the machines.

There was a famous episode of the original series of Star Trek called, “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield.” Like Mark and James, it was blunt and direct, and it illustrated how partiality, in this case negative, leads to ruin. Our heroes encounter a person marooned on a planet whose skin pigments was stark white on one side of his body, and darkest black on the other. A 50-50 split. When he realizes that those that saved were of a single pigment, he showed partiality by assuming they wanted to harm him. They then encounter another person whose pigments were exactly the same, but inverted. He said that he was chasing the other guy to return him to their home planet for various crimes. The two verbally spar with each other, with incredible hatred. It is later discovered that the source of their hatred, their irrational partiality was because their pigments were the opposite of the other. Our heroes are completely baffled, seeing them both as being from the same race, and the aliens are incredulous that they cannot see what is plain to themselves. They returned the aliens to their homeworld only to discover that the two factions had mutually destroyed each other. Even after seeing what their partiality had done to their world, they continued to fight each other. Our heroes then fly back amongst the stars, observing that their hate is all they have left.

When I was choosing which congregational church in Worcester I would attend, I attended one on a cold autumn day, and I walked there, so I was dressed in layers. I knew that I was not dressed in my Sunday best, because I needed to save the last clean button down shirt for the work the next day, and I figured that dressed down as I was, it would be a good gauge of how that church treated people. I drew some looks from other attendees, and when I stepped out to use the lavatory. While looking for it, I discovered that I was being followed by one of the deacons. I asked him for directions, was led to my destination, and was led back to my seat by him once I was done.

The story with Jesus reminds us to not have a bias against those who are different, as He is reminded by the Gentile woman. And James reminds us how showing partiality hurts those who are dishonored by that action. It is very difficult, everyone has instinctual reactions to other people, we make

assumptions, show partiality, & have bias, however subtle or small, we may not even realize it; but we must strive to follow their advice. To remember, as we boldly go, to treat everyone the same, without bias, without partiality in any form, being welcoming of heart to everyone we encounter in our daily lives.

Amen.

## Pastoral Prayer

[PAUSE]

Creator God, you call us to love and serve You with body, mind, and spirit through loving your creation and our sisters and brothers. Open our hearts in compassion and receive our thanksgivings and petitions on behalf of our church, our community, and the world.

We thank You for Your blessings, and for the lessons You teach us. We thank You for those You have sent to help us in our daily lives. And we thank You for the opportunities to serve You through serving others, seeing to their needs.

We pray for the forgiveness of our missteps. We pray for your guidance to live our lives in more loving ways.

We pray for those who are unwell of mind, of body, or of spirit. We pray for their recovery, we pray for their caregivers, and we pray that you move us to help them in any way our gifts allow. We pray for those who are lost, so that they may find guidance. We pray for the refugees around the world, please see them to safer places. We pray for those who protect us, please keep them safe as they have kept us safe. And we pray that you help us to be instruments of your divine love.

We especially pray for:

Hear our prayers, both spoken and unspoken, you know the prayers of our hearts. And free us from the grip of distractions, that we may be of service to others in your name in our lives. Amen

James 2:1-10, 14-17

2:1 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

2:2 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,

2:3 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,"

2:4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

2:5 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?

2:6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?

2:7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

2:8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

2:9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

2:14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?

2:15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,

2:16 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?

2:17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7:24-37

7:24 From there he 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,

7:25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

7:26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

7:27 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."

7:28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

7:29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter."

7:30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

7:31 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.

7:32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

7:33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.

7:34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."

7:35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

7:36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

7:37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."