

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was given a golden rule of preaching in seminary, which was this, "Never include a confession in your sermon." I'm about to break that golden rule and confess that I've always dodged preaching on this passage from the gospels. It must have come up 20 times or so in my ministry. It comes up regularly in the lectionary, and I always dodge it, until now.

I've just not wanted to get into this exchange that Jesus has with this woman that's recorded in the gospels. He seems to be saying something which isn't just uncharacteristic, but downright rude. But today, I feel I have to tackle the gospel, because what I like to do in my sermons is see how the different readings that we have set for the day speak to each other.

My first reading of the lessons today, there's a strong theme that comes across clearly in all the readings, except the gospel. So how do they speak to each other? Because the gospel appears at first reading to be contrary to what's coming across in the other readings. So I want to have a look at it in that context.

The reading from James that we heard, our epistle, is very clear and very direct. It needs no words of explanation. It's all about treating God's people equally, fairly and with justice. The writer's saying, "Don't look down on any particular group of people, especially the poor." He uses three phrases to make the point. He complains that his readers show acts of favoritism, they make distinctions, they show partiality. Favoritism, distinctions, partiality. Three things, James says, to be avoided at all costs in the church community.

James, in that reading, is reinforcing the things of the other reading. In Proverbs we get that sense, too, that God has made the rich and the poor. They're all to be treated equally. In the Psalm we get that sense that God has a concern for the stranger, the orphan and the widow. That God's heart is with the outcast, those on the margins.

That comes across loud and clear. God does not draw distinctions between us and them. God does not have favorites. God does not show partiality to the rich. All this is very clear from our readings from James, Proverbs, and the Psalms.

Then we get to the gospel. How does that fit in? A woman comes to see Jesus and asks Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter. Jesus replies, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Which seems at first, and perhaps, second and third readings, to sound as if Jesus is drawing a strong distinction between Jews and Gentiles. In fact, not only drawing a distinction, but using derogatory language to make that distinction, to talk between them and us.

Until this week, that's where I had left the gospel because I didn't know where else to look to make sense of it. But I thought about it further now, and let me try and share some thoughts and see if we can see how it fits in with the rest of the readings set for today. What's going on here?

Well it might help, I think first, if we think about how these seemingly harsh words are said, because we all know how important tone of voice is. One person can say something that somebody else says and it sounds terribly offensive. It's the way things are said and who's saying what. It is possible that Jesus recognized that this woman was up for a bit of verbal jousting. She was of a Greek background, and they were known to enjoy these robust conversations.

Was there a rapport between them? Did Jesus know that the woman would pick up on some irony in His voice, as He says to her a phrase that was common at the time, that many of the Jewish leaders would have said. Perhaps it was a phrase that she'd heard before. Maybe the woman was up for the challenge, because she takes Jesus's language and uses it in her request. Jesus lauds her for it. Is He deliberately steering the conversation so that it's the woman who makes the crucial point, who cuts through what Jesus is offering as a

standard, unhelpful statement? It's the woman who grabs the limelight, who says the true thing. Well, we can't be sure of what's going on there, because we only have the words, not the tone of voice recorded.

Perhaps more significant is the context in which this conversation takes place. I think the story can be seen in a different light when it's seen in context. It comes in the midst of a series of stories over three or four chapters about bread. It's bound on one side by a story where Jesus takes five loaves and two fishes and multiplies the loaves so much so that not only are 5,000 fed, but there are 12 baskets left over. Then a chapter or so later, this little section ends with another story of Jesus multiplying bread. This time, not in Jewish territory, but in Gentile territory. The same thing happens. The disciples bring bread, it's multiplied, and this time there are seven basketfuls left over of bread.

It's important the distinction between the Jewish and the Gentile context here, because that was the biggest issue in that culture and in the early church. There was this strong divide between the Jews and the Gentiles. Yet they all ended up in church together. If you read the New Testament, it's full of how do these two groups of people relate to each other. That was the big dominant issue at the time.

Immediately before the story of Jesus meeting this woman, we heard last week in church about the bust-up He had with the Jewish religious leaders. They'd come to Him because they were upset because they'd seen some of Jesus's disciples eating bread with what they said was unclean or defiled hands, by which they meant that the disciples hadn't gone through with what the law required of the ritual cleaning before they ate. The argument ends, and it got rather heated, with Jesus declaring that nothing external was unclean. In that way, Jesus is starting to dismantle the whole ritual system of cleanliness through which the Jews were able to distinguish between clean and unclean, between Jew and Gentile, between us and them. That was the system that Jesus was taking on.

Straight after this rather heated debate, Jesus heads off to the region of Tyre, where our gospel reading is set. Tyre is Gentile country. The woman who comes to see him is identified as a Gentile woman of Syro-Phoenician origin. That detail must be important for it to be included in the story. I think when we see the context of this feisty exchange, we can see how it fits with the theme that Mark's developing in his gospel. After Jesus in His discussion with the Jewish religious leaders opens up the possibility of Gentiles being included in the Kingdom, here we see Jesus go into Gentile territory and the power of that Kingdom operates there, too.

The good news of the Kingdom can't be bottled up with the people of Israel. The Jewish people might have heard the good news of the Kingdom first, but it wasn't exclusively for them. The woman uses Jesus's language to point out that there's enough bread to go around. There are crumbs, there are leftovers. I think what we see in this story, and in the surrounding chapters, is that the barriers between people, between the Jews and the Gentiles, are starting to be taken down.

Jesus is separating the barriers between the Jews and the Gentiles. The message is reinforced as Jesus goes off to heal a deaf Gentile man in Gentile territory. God's Kingdom and the power of that Kingdom is being offered to all. This revolutionary message that Jesus brings is developed by the New Testament writers. They see what Jesus is doing in His ministry and in His message. St. Paul writes this, "In Christ, there is no Jew, no Gentile, slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." That was an extremely challenging and revolutionary thought in that context.

Maybe we're not as sophisticated as we think we are, because I think that's still a revolutionary message in our context. That there are no divisions. We are one in Christ Jesus. St. Paul recognizes how radical Jesus's life and message had been. He knew that Jesus mixed with people who other people of His type didn't mix with. He went to places that

other people didn't go to. He said there's no divide between the clean world and the unclean, between us and them.

Yes, Jesus was a Jew. Yes, the message He gave went first to the people of Israel. But the Kingdom He spoke of was for all. The banquet He anticipated was open to everyone. All God's people are invited to share in the heavenly bread. So if we see all these readings together, that there's a common theme coming out, what do they say to us now?

Well, they certainly point us in the direction of breaking down barriers, barriers which all these years later still are there. Maybe not the same barriers that Jesus experienced between Jew and Gentile, but certainly other barriers. You don't need me to name what they are.

We all play a part in those barriers being erected. We all have favorites, we all make judgments, we all define ourselves by what we're not. There's that famous story of the judge who said to a potential juror, "So why is it that you can't serve on this jury?" The man said, "Well, I know he's guilty. I couldn't possibly give him a fair trial. Just look at him! He's got guilt written all over his face." The judge leaned over and said, "You're actually pointing not at the Defendant, but at his lawyer." We all need to work at how we see people, how we look at people, to develop what The Bible says is God's way of looking at people when He looks at the heart, not at external appearances.

Some of you may know that our arts committee is having a show in November. We've sponsored an art therapist down at ECS to work with the homeless community. They're putting on a show in November. I'm delighted they're coming here. We're having 20 of that community to come and show their work. In that context, we're being very careful to talk about the artists that are coming, not the homeless. Because we can all see people in different ways. We all put labels on people that they may not deserve.

I think we need to learn how we can talk to people who are different to us, who think differently to us.

We all know that our society's becoming increasingly divided, more and more split into groups who see the world in terms of us and them. So I'm very pleased that in the fall, Mother Rebecca has organized a series of forums which is following a course to help us talk to people with those of different views. Maybe tackling the subjects that we daren't tackle on the patio after the service, actually going a bit deeper, and deliberately engaging with areas where we're different. Opening up different political views, looking at challenging subjects, in the confidence that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free, Republican or Democrat. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

May we be given the grace to live that truth out in our shared life together.

Amen.