Putting Love to the Test

James 2:1-17 Crossroads Christian Church
Mark 7:24-37 Sep. 6, 2012, Pent. 14B

Many years ago, back when I was a much younger minister in Iowa, I was leading a day-retreat at the First Christian Church in Red Oak, on the Beatitudes. There was a knock on the door, so I excused myself, and met a real-life hobo. That wasn't too uncommon, as Red Oak was a railroad town, and those who rode the rails would often get off there and panhandle. This particular hobo looked a lot like a down-on-his-luck Santa Claus. Of course he asked for some meal money, and I gave him some. Then I went back to the study group and said that our visitor had come at just the right time, because how could I say no to someone asking for help, and then go back to lead a study about being merciful?

Linus, in the old Peanuts comic, was admonished by his sister Lucy to love mankind. Lucy shouted out, "I love mankind. It's people that I can't stand!" It's easy to love in general, but not as easy to respond lovingly to people in particular.

Anybody who has been a parent, whether or not they will admit it out loud, have had experiences where their love has been stretched and tested almost to the limit. Of course there are blow-ups where the kid shouts, "I hate you!" and stomps out and slams the door. But there are more serious times of testing, like when a child gets sucked into an addiction; or ends up in jail. Sandy and I just saw a movie on Netflix a couple of weeks ago, called "Heart of the Country." It dealt with issues of family and the struggles for forgiveness, and in many ways was a retelling of the story of the Prodigal Son. Forgiveness and acceptance aren't easy; but then we remember that our role model is the waiting father.

Both of our scripture texts today explore what God offers us and wants of us today. But neither scripture text gives us pat answers or easy answers.

At first glance, the first part of our Gospel lesson seems harsh. It doesn't sound in character for Jesus. Usually we picture Jesus as compassionate for all the world's outcasts, as one who reached out in love to all around him. In Luke's gospel, he got in trouble right in the beginning of his ministry when he preached at his own hometown synagogue. He had pointed out to the home team that God's grace and mercy had been extended towards Gentiles—the Syrian general Naaman who was healed of leprosy, and the widow of Zarapeth, who showed hospitality to Elijah the prophet. He tried to widen their vision, and they didn't like it very much.

So why in this situation did Jesus seem so harsh, so unwelcoming,g to a foreigner? Let's put the story in context. Jesus had been having a hard time in Galilee. Religious and political enemies alike were threatening this new movement. So he had crossed a border, going north toward two old pagan cities, Tyre and Sidon. There a woman comes up to him—a woman from a pagan culture. But this seemingly pagan woman speaks to Jesus in the language of faith. "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David, my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." She believes in Jesus. She knows he is sent from God. And she believes he can help her. Earlier when another Gentile had come to Jesus asking for help to heal his child, Jesus didn't hesitate.

But this time, Jesus flat out ignores the woman. He pretends she isn't there. Now that's a normal reaction for a Jewish man of that time being approached by a woman, especially a pagan woman, but it doesn't seem normal for Jesus. The woman pleads her case again, desperate to save her child. And Jesus, seemingly, insults her. "Why waste the children's food on dogs?" He goes on to explain that his mission is to the lost sheep of Israel, not to people like her. Jesus had been interrupted before by other women, by other Gentiles, and he had acted compassionate. But not now.

The woman is persistent, and humble. She accepts Jesus' terms and puts a twist on them. "Lord, even the little puppy dogs under the table get the children's crumbs." God's bounty, God's love is enough for everyone, not just for Jewish males. And that did it. Her persistence, her faith, her love for her child, got through to Jesus. He marveled at her faith, and he healed the child.

So what happened? Elton Trueblood, a great Quaker preacher, wrote a book called *The Humor of Christ.* In it, he offered the suggestion that even though Jesus was speaking arrogant-sounding words, maybe he said them with a glint of humor and compassion in his eye, but in a gentler way than it sounded. The Bible, like email, doesn't tell us the tone of voice, just the words. Others say that Jesus was testing the woman's faith and determination. One preacher just said that Jesus had been having a really bad day and she had gotten on his last nerve.

For whatever reason, something significant happened. A wall was torn down. A bridge was built. A stereotype was smashed. A woman in her need found help from Jesus Christ. And for us, this is terribly, terribly important, because we are the Gentile dogs. We're the outsiders. The little story is one giant step toward extending the mission of Christ to the whole world. It shows us that God's love and compassion, Christ's love and compassion, is not limited to those with the right credentials, the right background. As Paul said in Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

The second story, about the man who was deaf and mute, reinforces the first. Jesus was in the Decapolis, another Greek, Gentile area, and he reached out to touch and heal someone again, who was an outsider by his ethnic heritage, and also an outsider because he was unable to communicate. In one of my commentaries, Karen-Pidcock-Lester, asks why Jesus "took the man away in private," and suggests that it "could mean that Jesus was simply showing the utmost consideration for the man's feelings, not wishing to embarrass him with any public display. It also could indicate that Jesus wanted to gain the man's undivided attention, with no distractions from curious spectators."[1] But she also points out "If you imagine Jesus trying to communicate to this man who cannot hear, you might see his specific actions—placing fingers in the man's ears, spitting, touching his tongue, looking up to heaven—as a form of sign language, a physical means of communication in place of words, to explain to the man what is happening."[2] (unquote) Then Mark tells of Jesus calling out in Aramaic, "Ephphatha," or "Be open!" and the man was healed. Jesus had reached out in love.

When James wrote his letter, a generation after Jesus, Roman culture as a whole regarded Christians as a sect, an insignificant bunch of misfits that didn't really amount to anything. They had no power, no prestige, no credentials, no history. The church itself was trying to get its head into the message of Jesus; that the poor, the meek, the heartbroken, the hungry and thirsty were all among God's most blessed children. But James knew that Christians were in danger of slipping over into the values of the predominant culture. As in the world as a whole, the church leaders were kowtowing to the rich and powerful, and treating the poor and needy as second-class citizens. Playing favorites based on wealth and status was completely against the mercy and compassion that Christ taught. For James, it didn't matter as much what you said that you believed, as how you treated God's most vulnerable, hurting children.

So the two passages together tell us to be very, very careful about labeling people as outsiders because they are not like us. It's all too human to divide the world into us and them, to pass judgment on people who are different than us. These passages challenge us at our points of prejudice. Even people that we don't like are God's children and deserve to be treated as such. These passages challenge us to be welcome and inviting to all who, to help outsiders become insiders.

Jesus and James both want us to put our love to the test—so that our actions and attitudes are consistent with the love that we claim. God wants us to be whole, and God wants us to help other people become whole and healthy. The Rev. Kay Sylvester, an Episcopal rector, points out that the Gospel here is a verb—it's an action—it's doing God's work. She quotes the The late Verna Dozier, Episcopal teacher and theologian, put it this way: "Don't tell me what you believe; tell me what difference it makes that you believe."[3]

Sometimes we put God's love to the test by having narrow and judgmental attitudes, like the Pharisees of old. Sometimes other people put

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[1] Cynthia Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson, eds.. *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark,* Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 213

[2] Ibid., p. 215

[3] Kay Sylvester, "The Gospel is a Verb," Sermons that Work, episcopaldigitalnetwork.com.

our love to the test. But if we remember that the Gospel is a verb, that faith leads to loving action, then our lives can be transformed, and we can transform the lives of others around us. May God bless us as we seek to be active disciples of Christ. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon