

Mark 7:24-30

²⁴From 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, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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.” ²⁸But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

“Another Pair of Eyes” – Andy Wing, 9.6.09

I don’t know about you, but I’ve always appreciated a collaborative work environment. For example, I often like to talk to other people before, during, and after I write my sermons. Otherwise it’s too easy to get stuck with tunnel vision. Of course Stephanie and I talk frequently, but I also enjoy talking to my dad, some friends of mine who are also ministers, and some of the ministers here in Mercer County. While these extra eyes are all valuable, they’re also all ministerial. Last week I went back to something I did more regularly in my internship in Greenville. I bypassed the “insider” feedback and looked for fresh eyes in the youth of the church. After all, they are the future of the church. Whose insight could be more valuable?

Fresh eyes can help to open up new insights, and can challenge the “usual” way of seeing and doing things. But if we’re honest, it can also be difficult to open ourselves to new perspectives. New perspectives might call us out of our comfort zones, to change the way things have always been done, and that can be difficult – even scary. We have to sympathize with the Jewish leaders of Jesus day in some ways. After all, Jesus quickly became an outsider by healing lame people, breaking Sabbath rules, and telling sick people their sins are forgiven. All the while, he rebukes the Pharisees and other religious leaders who are very much a part of the system. Jesus brings a new set of eyes that aren’t always so welcome.

And probably what draws the most ire and causes blood to boil the most is that Jesus doesn't just do this quietly. There is no escaping his critique. When he is not telling a story that is way over the heads of the teachers of the law, he relishes the opportunity to drop in some stinging witty remark. You know some of those one-liners – “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” for example. This side of Jesus is so often whitewashed, and we don't often read carefully enough to see the sting delivered by Jesus' words. Jesus' wit is an aspect of the gospel that is often missed by the cursory reader.

This witty Jesus is surprising, but also more human. He tells it like is and he doesn't let people get away with ignorance. I know some youth who might like this Jesus. They would love to have him walk down the halls with them, and when one of the bullies tells them that the 8th grade hallway is reserved for 8th graders and cool 7th graders, they'd like to have Jesus there to tell them how it is. There is not a middle school kid alive who wouldn't love to walk around with the guy who has the perfect comeback to everything. You see, the comeback is the most important weapon in the middle school arsenal. It can instantly turn 20 kids who would be laughing at you should you say the wrong thing to 20 new friends who want you to sit at the cool table. But the perfect comeback is an art. Not only does it put someone in his or her place, but it speaks to the heart of the truth that everyone else is afraid to point out.

There are many genres through which we can look at the gospel. Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner points out at least three in his book, *The Gospel as Comedy, as Tragedy, and as Fairy Tale*. But what about the Gospel as the Teenage Sarcastic Comeback, or as Joe suggested to me last week, the Gospel as the Art of Comeback?

The Gospel as the Art of the Comeback is like the John Hughes movie, *The Breakfast Club*, where there are five teenagers (each representing a different clique in high school) who spend a Saturday in detention together and come to realize that they are all deeper than their respective stereotypes. Each one owns a label that is placed on them. There is the Princess, the Athlete, the Brain, the Criminal, and the Basketcase. Though these five strangers seem to have nothing in common, they at least share the common lot of Saturday morning detention in the high school library, where they are scolded and ordered not to speak or move from their seats by the antagonistic principal. He assigns a 1,000 word essay in which each student must write about who they think they are. As they are left alone for stretches of time, they are at first antagonistic towards each other, but then they begin to open up to each other and reveal their inner secrets.

At the end of the movie, the group writes one essay together, challenging the principal in his preconceived judgments about all of them. They leave it on a table for him to read, and then they walk out of the school, having forged the kind of friendships that could have only come from this experience. The letter illustrates the change in the student's judgments of one another, and their realization that they truly have things in common.

They write: "Dear Mr. Vernon, we accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was that we did wrong. What we did WAS wrong. But we think you're crazy to make us write this essay telling you who we think we are. What do you care? You see us as you want to see us...in the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal. Correct? That's the way we saw each other at seven o'clock this morning. We were brainwashed. But

what we found out is that each one of us is a brain AND an athlete AND a basketcase AND a princess AND a criminal..." The letter is signed, "The Breakfast Club."

The Gospel as the Art of Comeback is like this. It is the apocalyptic aspect of the gospel that shakes people out of their preconceived ideas and notions. If we get too comfortable where we are, we tend to stop moving. And if we stop moving for too long, we can get stuck in our ways. And sometimes when we are stuck in our ways, it takes a shaking or a scraping to get us loose enough to change. When we get stuck, we put labels on each other and we see each other as we want to see each other. We make our judgments and then generally stick with them.

We see labels at work in our Gospel reading today. It might sound harsh to us when Jesus calls this woman and her daughter "dogs," but it probably didn't shock anyone else around Jesus at the time. They all knew who the "dogs" were. The label Gentile dog was thrown around so much in Jesus' day that it probably became its own subset of dog. "I saw a dog down at the market." Oh what kind of dog? Was it a wild dog? A house dog? Or a Gentile dog?

This dog talk might have been commonplace enough, but we don't recognize that kind of behavior from Jesus. This woman asked Jesus to cast the demons from her daughter, and after all, he had done it often enough before. When one man with leprosy asked Jesus "If you choose, you can make me clean", it says Jesus moved with compassion said, "I do choose. Be made clean." But there is none of that language here in his encounter with the Syrophenician woman. There is no emotion mentioned at all. Instead, it is just a deadpanned, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the puppies." Any emotion that we put on Jesus' words is just guesswork.

But we often make the interpretive mistake of assuming that Jesus is always serious, never light-hearted. But let's look at our story today. There are at least two options here. Either Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the puppies" hoping that will be enough to make her go away and leave him alone so he can rest and get back to the really important people, the Jews. But, this is a Jesus who sides with the bullies. Or, maybe he hopes to engage her in a conversation. This is the Jesus that I have come to know and the Jesus middle schoolers would want with them, the one who loves to banter and get the great comeback in. This Jesus loves people, loves to tease, loves relationship and leaves little openings in his speech that invite us to dig deeper.

If this conversation is banter, this is how it goes. Jesus goes to Tyre. He's in the land of the Gentiles. Chances are he will run into what? A Gentile who wants healing. If he's not ok with that, he has come to the wrong place. It's an odd coincidence that every time Jesus travels into Gentile country, he meets Gentiles! So, an inevitable meeting takes place, between he and a Gentile woman. The woman wants healing for her daughter, of course, because the daughter has demons and there just aren't that many people around who are casting out demons. Jesus delivers his line, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Only instead of the usual word for dog, Jesus uses the word for puppy or housedog. Housedog, Housedog, The woman jumps right at that image, "Even the puppies under the table get the crumbs from the children."

We have to admit, that was a good comeback by the Syro-Phoenician woman. A witty line delivered to one of the all-time masters of the comeback, and immortalized in Scripture for all who appreciate witty banter. Jesus, being the master, probably anticipated this comeback, and even hoped she would say it. But if he didn't anticipate it, I bet it made him grin bigger. It is

usually the case that someone who is adept at witty banter is delighted to meet another like mind. But lest we get too caught up in the banter, let us also pay attention to the image that they have created together. In their banter, everyone is sitting together...the Children, who are the Jews, Jesus, and the Gentiles, who get their food, too. This would have been revolutionary in their time. Jews didn't want these dogs in the house. But, Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman could care less about the culturally accepted categories of Clean and Unclean. In fact, perhaps if they all found themselves together in the same room, told to sit quietly and write an essay explaining themselves, they might come up with something like this:

You see us as you want to see us... In the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. You see us as a Jew, a Gentile, a Clean, and an Unclean, but what we found out is that each one of us is a Jew AND a Gentile AND a Clean AND an Unclean...

To some degree, we all have the labels we like to stick to other people. Jesus challenges us to give that up. I hear people say they love people but they don't have to like them. But anybody can like the likeable. If you want to blend in with everybody, just keep hanging out with the people most like you. We might see Jesus in a new light in this Gospel as the Art of Comeback – as the cool witty guy. But he didn't use that to build his “in crowd.” Instead he used it to speak for those who couldn't speak for themselves, the unlikeable. You want to live Gospel and embrace Jesus? Take the first step, drop the labels, and embrace those who Jesus embraced, including the unlikeable, the dirty, and any other category of “other” that keeps us from accepting those whom God loves. Pray for a new pair of eyes that sees beyond labels, opening us up to new ways of showing Christ's love to others, to new ways of being Christ's Body on earth.