

Fame

You may remember that I have a sort of special curiosity about this story of the Syrophenician woman and her demon possessed daughter. It's my "birthday passage" something only those of us with the first names of Bible books get to do. It contains Mark 7:28, but lately I have found myself thinking a lot about this strange little story and the racial and cultural dynamics it implies. Some people sort of need to let Jesus off the hook for calling this woman a dog, and there are various ways to do so, the first is to imply the mutuality of the distaste between Jew and Gentile and point out that Gentiles disliked and mistrusted Jews as much as the reverse. This is sort of the modern situation between Israel and Palestine transferred back 2000 years, and it actually holds some water. Neither side had a distinct advantage in the racial animosity, Gentiles had way more numbers and Jews had a very tight cultural bond that gave them strength. Jesus calling this woman a dog was much more akin to a black person calling a white person a racial slur, he was the minority, not her.

Another option is that Jesus was sort of testing the waters. He had experienced the reality that unexpected people seemed to "get" his message of the Kingdom better than the people who were most immersed in the covenant of God with Israel. This is a foreshadowing of the opening of the covenant to all flesh, not just the descendants of Abraham through Isaac. Again, maybe, and given the result of his healing the girl, this is perhaps the best explanation. But in context, Mark tells us why this happens: Jesus is tired of the fame. This is a real thing that we know about from people who get famous, from rock stars to pro athletes, they get tired of the constant attention and they can become frustrated with not being able to just go out to dinner or to the grocery store without being recognized.

Jesus doesn't want to be recognized, he doesn't want to be constantly mobbed by people asking him for things. This kind of attention is actually getting in the way of what he feels his true purpose is, yet he is not willing to simply stop the healings and things because of his compassion for those who suffer. That's a key thing here and it is an important thing to understand with regard to Jesus, and it affects how we follow him. He (and his disciples) are not primarily here to just fix all people's aches and pains. Throughout history people have manifested what is called a charisma (gift of the spirit) of healing, but it's actually pretty rare, probably for a good reason. In the early church the manifestations of various spiritual gifts became somewhat divisive, with people who had one gift thinking theirs was better than others. Paul and the other apostles often had to quash some beefs over the whole problem.

It got to the point where some communities actually retreated from doing good things, whether they were charisms or not. Churches in that scenario started to fall into that trap of institutionalism that I talked about last week, they lost their love and their energy. James writes his letter to one such church, that had let their light go out and had stopped doing good things and leaned on welcoming the wealthy and influential into a sort of "spiritual" gathering. That is the context of James' most famous line: "faith without works is dead."

I believe that these stories in the Gospels are to illustrate for us, how to deal with the tension of being people with access to the power of God. Think about it, if any of us suddenly had the power that Jesus had, how long do you think it would be before we went completely off the rails? That's why the Gospels essentially tell us these cautionary tales about how Jesus felt about his crowd-pleasing talents and the ability to work signs and wonders. It's why they tell us how ambivalent and even frustrated he could be about the two edged sword of supernatural power. The miracles are ways to get people to believe, but they also, far too easily, become the center of attention.

“With great power, comes great responsibility,” the moral of Spiderman, but also something that has been noticed by other more philosophical types as well. Christ is trying to invite people into this thing he calls the Kingdom of God, which is like a whole bunch of different things. The works of compassion are just the tip of the iceberg, just the very beginning of what might be possible in a reality that is entirely governed by God’s love, mercy and grace. Jesus pretty clearly comes to view the things he can do as a very mixed sort of blessing. He can heal, feed, cast out demons, still storms and all sorts of things, but he runs into brick walls when it comes to convincing people that these things are, in fact, completely normal parts of the Kingdom of God. They don’t believe that he is an embodiment of something that God is intending for all of us, and thus they always treat him like he’s a superhero, and insist that he save the day (even his disciples do this).

Consider the implications this has for the church today, what are our growth strategies? What are our missions? It would be wrong of us to run from doing works of compassion, Jesus didn’t, even when he wanted to, but he also understood that the works by themselves are not the thing, it is the Kingdom of God that is the thing. What is the Kingdom of God like, to what can we compare it, well that’s what all the other stuff besides the miracles and healings was trying to get at. Thus we don’t get to be one sided, we don’t get to just try to do good works, and we don’t get to just wrestle with theology, we have to do both, it really is a two way street. “Faith without works is dead,” sure but the inverse might just be: “works without faith are futile.”

Very few of the people whom Jesus healed appear to have become his close companions and confidants, in fact many of them didn’t even follow his instructions and went around blabbing to everyone. And there is some evidence that his actual disciples didn’t stay with him because of the miracles, they endured with him because they understood he had the words of life, and they knew there was no other way to the Father. We must not let ourselves be dragged to one side of this creative tension. I often joke that this whole pastoring thing would be easier if I had the ability to work miracles, but if I pay attention to the Gospels, that is actually the exact opposite of what would happen, it wouldn’t get easier, it would get harder.

Christian discipleship, ministry, mission, whatever you want to call it is about learning to be like Jesus, and learning to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven like he did. If it takes miracles, then we will get miracles, but at the same time, they may be more trouble than they’re worth.