

Synthesis

A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship following the Revised Common Lectionary

Proper 18 — Year B
September 6, 2015

Breaking Down Barriers

The Gospel passage includes two healing stories that take place in Tyre and Decapolis—Gentile territories that had historically been hostile to Jews. When Jesus arrived in Tyre, he sought privacy; but reports of Jesus' fame had spread, and "he could not escape notice" (7:24).

Thus a local woman appealed to Jesus to heal her daughter, who was possessed by an "unclean spirit" (v. 25; cf Mt. 15:21-28). Initially Jesus harshly denied her request, saying that he had come to feed the children (Jews) and not the dogs (Gentiles). Dogs were unclean animals, and to be called a dog was an insult. But the woman continued to press her case, replying that even the dogs are allowed leftovers. She did not challenge the priority of the Jews, but pointed also to the Gentiles' claims.

Jesus then acquiesced to the woman's argument, declaring that her daughter had been healed "for saying that" (v. 29). The healing took place instantaneously and from a distance. When the woman returned home, her child was in bed and the demon gone.

In her persistence, this unnamed woman stood her ground and bested Jesus in a verbal exchange. Here the focus is not so much on the exorcism itself as the establishment of a basis for the mission to the Gentiles. Jesus had broken down the boundaries of geography, gender, ethnicity, and religious purity to extend the Kingdom of God to all who would receive it.

The second healing story is unique to Mark. As Jesus continued his travels to the Decapolis, a deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to him for healing. Jesus took the man aside, and the healing process here was more complex than usual. Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears, and then "he spat and touched his tongue" (v. 33).

Normally spitting was viewed as a sign of extreme contempt and rejection in Hebrew culture (cf Num. 12:14; Dt.

25:9). The ignominy of Jesus' ordeal at the crucifixion was reinforced as he was spat upon (Mk. 15:19). But there was also a widespread belief in the ancient world that spittle contained healing properties. On two other occasions Jesus used saliva as a healing agent (Mk. 8:23; Jn. 9:6), transforming a gesture of insult and abasement into a means of healing grace.

Jesus then looked up to heaven in a sign of prayer and an acknowledgment of God as the source of his healing power. With a sigh, perhaps the breath of compassion, he said, "Ephphatha" (v. 34)—an Aramaic word that Mark has translated as "Be opened." This was not a magical incantation but a demonstration of the power of the word (cf Ex. 4:11). For with the utterance of this single word from Jesus, the man was healed of his infirmities: he could hear and speak plainly.

Immediately, Jesus cautions the witnesses to this event to tell no one. This "Messianic secret" is a frequent feature of the healing narratives (cf 1:34, 44-45; 5:43; 8:26). Too many people were seeking out Jesus for personal advantage, to have their ailments cured with little or no concern for the deeper truth he brought.

Of course, such warnings did little to silence news of his miracles. The response of the onlookers here was astonishment "beyond measure" (v. 37), and the declaration that Jesus does all things well. For even as Jesus tries to silence it, God's reign proclaims itself—those who witness the manifestations of God's Kingdom can't keep quiet.

Jesus' actions here to make the deaf hear and the mute speak recall Isaiah 35:5-6 and are a sign of the eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God present in the ministry of Jesus. These two healing stories also serve as a model for the Markan church to extend its boundaries beyond Israel and to reach out to all in need.

The Epistle reading calls attention to right treatment of the poor, and the need to obey the commandments. First there is the reminder that God's acceptance of all who come in faith must be reflected in the Christian community. True believers in Christ should show no partiality to those who have power and riches in the world. In truth, God has "chosen the poor

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY
Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom ... " (Jas. 2:5; cf Lk. 6:20). In contrast, the rich bring oppression and blasphemy.

Verse 8 is a reminder that we are to love our neighbors in fulfillment of the Scriptures. Showing partiality toward one group is a sin, and to make even a small departure from the Law is to fail the whole Law (v. 10; cf Lev. 19:15). Thus we are to speak and act "as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty" (v. 12), for true liberty comes from doing God's will.

In the end, "mercy triumphs over judgment" (v. 13), as merciful acts turn God's condemnation away from those who perform them. Verses 14-17 express the demand for action that is central to the Epistle of James. Thus if love toward a neighbor in need fails to prompt the active relief of that need, it is meaningless. A claim to faith that does not result in action is dead (v. 17). It is by our actions that our faith becomes manifested in the world.

The Old Testament reading echoes the Epistle, calling attention to God's care for the marginalized, and challenging the idea that wealthy people have been favored by God (Prov. 22:2). The Lord looks after the poor and afflicted; and a good name is of more value than great riches.



Old Testament Track 2: Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146

Chapter 35 of Isaiah looks forward to the return of the exiles from captivity in Babylon and expresses hope for the future based on God’s faithfulness. In this new exodus, the Lord will provide safe passage on their journey. Thus the people are not to fear, for God “will come and save you” (35:4b).

As Israel is renewed, human suffering will be ended and afflictions relieved, as the blind see, the deaf hear, the mute speak, and the lame leap like deer. (Later on, the Christian community would see these promises reflected in the healing ministry of Jesus.) Whereas the land had been laid to waste, now “waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert” (v. 6b).

This summary of God’s promises heralds the blessings of the Messianic age, as the Lord restores and refreshes the souls of all who hunger and thirst after God and God’s righteousness.

In response, the Psalmist offers a hymn of praise to the Lord who is always faithful, executes justice, cares for those in need, upholds the righteous, and brings ruin to the wicked. Thus, happy are those who put their trust in the Lord and not in mortals “in whom there is no help” (146:3b).

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We next find Jesus in a Gentile house in the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon (Mk. 7:24-30). When a Syrophenician woman begs for his help in exorcising her daughter, he refuses at first but then succumbs to her clever response and heals the child. The passage shows its linkage with what preceded it because the discourse takes place in terms of food—whether it is right to take the children’s food and give it to the dogs, and, in response, that even the dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from the children’s table (7:27-28). Jesus’ refusal is based on the prior right of Jews, but it is so cleverly circumvented by the Gentile woman and so easily set aside by Jesus that we must conclude that it is a straw man. This is not an assertion of Jewish priority but rather its repudiation.

From Gentile Tyre, he goes to the predominantly Gentile Decapolis (7:31)

where, through a particularly elaborate magical ritual, he heals a man who was deaf and dumb. Because this sort of thing was *de rigueur* for pagan healers, Jesus in the Decapolis does as expected of a wandering magician. We are again being told that external forms do not matter. It does not matter that he does not wash before meals like a good Jew and behaves like a pagan magician, just as it does not matter that he enters a pagan house in Tyre or extends the compassion of the God of Israel to a Gentile woman. Jesus is “all things to all people” and custom does not matter for him when it clashes with the opportunity to extend the power of the kingdom to others.

We may note that the healing takes place away from the crowd but in the presence of those who brought the deaf and dumb man to Jesus. So we have a limited circle of witnesses, like the household in Tyre, rather than the crowd as a whole. This is part of a theme of limited disclosure to the disciples and other chosen people who are commanded to keep the experiences to themselves. It does not amount to a “messianic secret,” however, because, in some cases, like the Gadarene, the beneficiaries are actually commanded to spread the news. It is rather an indication of the negativity of the crowd’s presence, inhibiting the free flow of faith and healing power.

—Robert Hamerton-Kelly in *The Gospel and the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 101-102.

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The Pharisees are offended; the Canaanite woman is not offended. The stark contrast is revelatory, for the opposite of offense [*skandalon*] is faith, but the only way to faith is through the possibility of offense.

—David McCracken in *The Scandal of the Gospels* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1994).

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Why does [Jesus], at first, compare this vulnerable, hurting woman to a dog, and refuse to help her? I suppose there are any number of ways we could make sense of it:

- He is testing the others in that

house, to see if they will go along with this line of reasoning.

- He is pushing the woman, to see how serious she is about her request.
- He is stating the first century way of understanding this situation 1) to contrast it, eventually, with his own way of thinking, or 2) to show how cold-hearted it is.
- He is still coming to terms with what his own role is, and in this story he begins to discover how radical his call is to help all people, no matter their background.

To adopt any of these explanations, though, is to let Jesus off the hook. St. Mark doesn’t do it, so perhaps we shouldn’t either. That leaves us with a Jesus who makes a demeaning comment to a woman in need (something the people of our day find very offensive), and who heals a woman that every other religious leader of his time would have felt perfectly free to ignore (something the people of his own day would have found very offensive).

So there we have it: a Jesus who is both deeply offensive, and a source of profound grace and mercy. It just may be that in this passage, we come close to experiencing him as first century people might have experienced him.

—David J. Risendal at onelittleword.org.

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Blessed indeed are “those who have not seen, and yet have learned to believe!” Blessed are they who ask for no miracles, demand nothing out of the ordinary, but who find God’s message in everyday life. . . . Blessed are they who are quick to hear, humble, free-spirited—that is, free from daily anxieties. Blessed are they who are able to find God’s message in the gospel reading for the day, even if they have heard it a thousand times, or in a sermon with no message in particular, or in phrases with no charismatic power about them. Yes, blessed are those who can find God in the rhythm of the mundane: in work and rest, success, joy, in encounters that gladden the heart, but also in occasions for disappointment or sorrow. Blessed are those who can see the Lord in all things!

—Romano Guardini.



SYNTHESIS (ISSN 1092-7778) is published monthly by PNMSI Publishing Co., Inc., PO Box 335, Boyds MD 20841. The yearly subscription fee is \$145; \$125 per year for e-mailed subscriptions. Periodicals postage paid at Boyds, MD 20841, and at additional office. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to: SYNTHESIS, PO Box 335, Boyds, MD 20841. Copyright ©2015 by PNMSI Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Photocopying or reproducing in any form in whole or in part is a violation of federal copyright law and is strictly prohibited without the publisher’s consent. For customer service, call 301-528-7777. Correspondence to Synthesis, PO Box 335, Boyds, MD 20841 or support@pnmsi.com.

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Volume 28 No. 9

“And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” Who do we think of immediately when we hear these words? I imagine we think of Herod offering the same thing to Salome, a young woman who then had to ask her mother what to ask for. Could she think of nothing *good* for her own people? No, she asked for a vengeance gift, the head of John the Baptist. But no, this time the words come from the Apocrypha, the story of Queen Esther. Again, a young woman—but a far more mature and courageous one—Esther asks for the salvation of her people.

What a difference between these two women. Comparing these stories gives us an excellent example of the results of our choices; the effects of other people on us; and the effect we have on others. Mordecai, who’d raised Esther, was a man of integrity and faith. He must have passed on to Esther the qualities of a faithful Jew, including courage in the face of danger. Like the woman Susanna, in another apocryphal story, Esther prays to God for guidance and courage, and her faith in God brings about great good. Salome, on the other hand, although most likely living the same kind of wealthy court life as Esther, is affected by her mother’s vengeful spirit and anger. Living in the household of Herod could not have been easy for the young woman—Herod’s court was full of intrigue and evil, so what else could she learn?

Another interesting comparison might be to add Vashti, the queen who lost Ahasuerus’ favor because she would not be used as an exhibit to entertain the king’s drunken party. We don’t consider Vashti enough in the story of Esther and it’s a shame. Vashti could be a model for young women today to refuse to be abused by men, their partners or others. Because of her decision, she angered her too-proud husband and was banished. Salome, even though we don’t know how she felt about it, danced provocatively before the king and his equally drunken party. Evidently her own mother didn’t question the use of her daughter as entertainment. The actions of Esther, Vashti, Susanna, Salome, and her mother might be an interesting theme for a Bible study. —SM

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What we do for Christ matters. And so, evidently, do the deeds of others—even if they aren’t “like us”!

We can be a tad prone to territorialism in our churches and denominations. Those “other” Chris-

tians don’t do things like we do them. Are we sure we can trust them?

Heck, we even get suspicious of folks who DO do things the way we do them! There are few fights more bitter than those that pit Baptists against Baptists, Lutherans against Lutherans, Episcopalians against Episcopalians, etc. ...

Verse 40 is what I would call a “chillax” verse; Jesus assures us that he is keeping an eye on things and that those other folk—the ones who don’t do things the same as we do—they’re not really against us, after all.

And, if they are ... well, God’s going to take care of them. Worms not dying, fire going unquenched and all that. God is the Righteous Judge who will dole out any consequences that are needed. That’s not our job; we are to “be at peace with one another.”

’Nuff said, don’t you reckon?

—John Fairless at lectionarylab.com (2012).

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In James 5, as this letter comes to a close, we hear a call to prayer. If you suffer—pray. If you’re happy—sing. If you’re sick, call for the elders so that they can pray. The first two directives can be undertaken by the individual, but in this third directive, such is not the case. Call for the elders, let them anoint you with oil and pray for you, so that you might be

healed. Such prayers have power, when they’re rooted in faith. But, for James sickness has a corollary—there is the possibility of sin, so confess your sins—not just to God, but to each other. As we hear this directive, many of us will stop and wonder about its wisdom. How much do we share and with whom?

Churches are communities full of broken humans. Sin resides in our lives. Confessing sins can be dangerous. Indeed, sharing our deepest secrets can be damaging to our lives. James speaks here of sins, but what about those other markers of our lives that we hide? People with mental illness dare not share their secrets, because there’s a stigma attached to mental health issues. Oh, you have depression, why is that? Is something wrong with you? Or what about one’s sexual orientation—we practice “don’t ask, don’t tell,” but those who are gay or lesbian live in fear of discovery, live in fear of what the community might think. Such fears render the community a place of brokenness rather than wholeness. But, there is hope—in prayer, for it has the power to heal. It may not cure, but most assuredly it can heal the brokenness that marks our lives and our relationships. Perhaps that’s what needs to happen so we can restore each other to the path of God.

—Robert Cornwall in *Ponderings on a Faith Journey* (2012).



H Y M N O D Y

Opening Hymn 359 “God of the prophets”—*Toulon*. Today’s readings, particularly the Gospel, tell of the drastic measures (literal and figurative) sometimes needed for us to remain unblemished from sin. Likewise, this hymn text supports that idea of Old Testament-style adherence to the law, an appropriate sentiment as we read of the institution of the Jewish feast of Purim in the Lesson from Esther (Track 1), and the transference of Moses’ spirit to the 70 elders in the Lesson from Numbers (Track 2).

Gloria in Excelsis or Hymn of Praise Continue with the setting chosen for the rest of Pentecost.

Sequence 609 “Where cross the crowded ways of life”—*Gardiner*. Today’s Gospel tells of Jesus’ teaching that “whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ” will find reward. This text echoes that message: “The cup of water given for thee still holds the freshness of thy grace” (s. 3).

Offertory Hymn 583 “O holy city, seen of John”—*Morning Song*. I can imagine no more poignant moment for shaping John’s vision of a holy city “where Christ, the Lamb, doth reign” (s. 1) than the discourse presented in today’s Gospel. Use a simple approach for this simple melody.

Communion Hymns 309 “O Food to pilgrims given”—*O Welt, ich muss dich lassen*. **W734** (*Wonder, Love, and Praise*, Church Publishing) “You laid aside your rightful reputation”—*Intercessor*. **L192** (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, Church Publishing) “I need thee ev’ry hour”—(by Robert Lowry).

Closing Hymn 347 “Go forth for God”—*Litton*. Send the people into the world with this hymn of discipleship. Present the melody with conviction (perhaps with a strong trumpet stop), as it can be difficult to those unfamiliar with it. Remember to vary registration on each stanza supporting the text, especially in unison hymns such as this.



I. Jesus and hyperbole.

Your Dictionary offers us some examples of hyperbole or over-exaggeration in literature:

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* author Harper Lee wrote, “People moved slowly then. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County.”

Paul Bunyan is one of America’s great folk heroes. His stories of legend are full of hyperbole—in fact he and his great Blue Ox Babe were examples of hyperbole themselves. One story read, “Well now, one winter it was so cold that all the geese flew backward and all the fish moved south and even the snow turned blue. Late at night, it got so frigid that all spoken words froze solid afore they could be heard. People had to wait until sunup to find out what folks were talking about the night before.”

“The People, Yes” is a poem by author and poet Carl Sandburg, whose funny quips are often called Sandburgers. The poem contains the hyperbole line, “It’s a slow burg—I spent a couple of weeks there one day.”

Gabriel García Márquez, one of the most celebrated authors of the 20th century, once wrote in *Living to Tell the Tale*: “At that time Bogota was a remote, lugubrious city where an insomniac rain had been falling since the beginning of the 16th century.” (An obvious exaggeration.)

In Flannery O’Connor’s novel *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes, the “Christ-haunted” hero, strives unsuccessfully to free himself from the all-absorbing influence of his backwoods Protestant fundamentalism. Haze struggles to live a life without sin. If he can avoid sin, he can avoid Jesus.

When this doesn’t work, he converts to “nothing” and preaches the “Church Without Christ.” In this phase, Haze immerses himself in sin, including blasphemy, fornication, and murder. But, finally driven (literally) to the end of this road, Haze blinds himself and gives himself over to a life of harsh asceticism and penitential suffering.

Taking literally the metaphorical sayings of Jesus, Haze engages in various acts of self-mortification—rocks and glass in his shoes, barbed wire around his body. When his landlady asks him why, he answers, “To pay.”

She responds, “Well, it’s not normal. It’s like one of them gory stories, it’s something that people have quit doing—like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats.”

The rationality of her words makes no impression on Haze. The inestimable value

of redemption was for him worth the price of self-mortification, penances, blindness: “He saw something he couldn’t get without being blind to everything else.”

II. “There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon the earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth”

—G. K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy*.

O’Connor in no way intends to present Hazel Motes as a model of Christian behavior. She does not suggest that anyone take literally the harsh scriptural admonitions. Yet she calls Haze a “saint” and suggests an apotheosis when he dies. Haze was definitely on to something—a vision of the Kingdom, when he was “blind to everything else,” an inner knowledge of the demand of the Gospel—the pearl of great price whose value exceeds all else.

Wanting to be “in” on the Kingdom was certainly on the minds of Jesus’ disciples. Their disputes over which of them was the greatest had been given satisfying closure in the paradoxical pronouncement that the way to greatness is to become the servant of all with a childlike lack of self-consciousness.

Here John, who was an obvious claimant to greatness among the disciples, along with his brother James, and Peter, raises the question of how the community is to relate to outsiders who seem to share its aims.

Jesus’ freeing of the possessed was so effective that his very name was seen by some as a sort of magic charm. So how are they to respond to the fact that someone who is not a disciple has been using the Lord’s name for exorcism, and with success?

Jesus’ answer is to point to the fact that these successes also fulfill God’s purposes. And so the generalization: *whoever is not against us is on our side* (Mk. 9:40).

In some other connection, a different pronouncement might be appropriate (Mt. 12:30; cf Lk 9:50). The one does not have to nullify the other—any more than Jesus’ “hard sayings” must be taken literally.

Here there are also assurances that their work is valued and meaningful: Whoever shall do the least kindness to you—perhaps no more than to provide a cup of water—because you belong to the Messiah, shall surely be rewarded (v. 41).

From this they can conclude that their own reward is certain.

III. What was Jesus’ true aim?

Randal Rauser writes in *The Tentative Apologist* (8/8/2012):

“My interest ... is to ask whether the hard sayings of Jesus constitute defeaters to claims for his moral excellence. The simple way to look at this is by adding up all Jesus’ teaching and draw our independent assessment of its moral value. Now assuming that we take this method, it does not automatically follow that if we find some incident we cannot explain—such as the fig tree or the Canaanite woman—that we are obliged automatically to surrender belief in Jesus’ moral perfection.

“Why is that? Well it is always possible that we haven’t figured out how what Jesus says and/or does fits into his moral vision. ... And so the presence of a smattering of problematic hard sayings does not necessarily constitute a defeater for the belief in Jesus’ moral excellence.”

In fact, because of several anomalies in the text (e. g., Jesus’ totally uncharacteristic use of the word “Christ” in v. 41), most commentators agree that Jesus probably did not utter these words in this context. Mark put the words in Jesus’ mouth to address his own church’s immediate needs.

Whatever the sources, as we now have this text, these are the last words that Jesus speaks in his homeland. In the next chapter he presses on into Judea on his journey toward Jerusalem. —IA

The Rev. Dr. Henry King Oehmig (1951–2015):

“I have sought to remind us that Scripture is a living Word of the Living God. What matters is not just what the Scripture *said*, but also what it *says*.”

“The Church’s wisdom says that in order to know Jesus as the Living Word, we need to follow him down the path provided for in the Lectionary. This ‘wheel of Scripture’ leads the people of God through a disciplined exposure to God’s saving work, from the Advent of Jesus’ Birth, through the Epiphany of his Revealing, on into the Season of Lent ... and to the joy of Easter. We go on to experience his Ascension, the Feast of Pentecost, Trinity Sunday—and Lessons of the Church season known as Ordinary Time ... leading to Christ the King Sunday, at the end of the Church Year.

“Throughout ... it is my fervent hope that you will see Scripture afresh; that you will hear it as a contemporary Word as well as an ancient Word. My prayer is that you will begin to hear the written Word as a vehicle through which Jesus, the living Word, grasps you and lifts you into the reality of the Real.”