

Finishing Our Lord's Sentence with Our Lives

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 23
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, September 6, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:4-7a; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Years ago I became acquainted with a set of identical twins, and we developed a friendship. Over time, I finally learned how to tell Katie and Kathy apart, both in their unique features and in their personalities. Yet what always amazed me was their connectedness to one another. They finished one another's sentences. In fact, one twin didn't have to say very much at all in order for the other twin to understand completely. I've read stories of twins long separated who yet followed somehow the same life patterns. I've read stories of twins raised together who continued through life with a deep, deep connection.

But this is not just so with twins. Quite often, people who have lived together for a long time—partners and spouses who know each other very well—have similar experiences to twins. I know how frequently my husband Randy and I complete each other's sentences after 21 years of marriage. Someone else listening to us might find it strange, but Randy and I understand what the other means, the point the other one is trying to make. I know that, even from across the room, I can tell by a look on his face what he's thinking. Not to say I'm never surprised, but because of all that time together, we tend to know what words or thoughts will come from the other. One of us will begin a thought and the other will bring it to its natural conclusion.

I'm proposing to you that the same could be said about our life in God—that as we spend time in this deep relationship God calls each of us into with him, we will, in a real sense, begin to finish our Lord's sentences with our own words—and deeds—because we will understand what he would say next. Our faithful lives will bring to its natural conclusion what is purposed in the very heart and mind of God. And it is the somewhat disconcerting story we read in Mark's Gospel today that leads me to offer that proposition to you.

There are folks who just don't like this story in Mark. Our Lord Jesus appears uncaring and lacking in compassion for the Syrophenician woman who begs him to heal her daughter. For he refuses to do so. Matthew's Gospel contains this story also, but Matthew softens it a bit by implying that it was the disciples who urged Jesus to ignore her request. Here in Mark, it's just Jesus and that woman.

Jesus is making a rather circuitous route through the region of Tyre—a region that was non-Jewish—and Mark states Jesus does that to escape notice. People in the region of Galilee, where Jesus had been, had followed Jesus everywhere, seeking miraculous feedings and healings at his hands. The last time in Mark that Jesus attempted to get away from it all for a bit of rest, he was discovered, and people came by any means they had, rushing toward him, carrying the sick with them. No, Jesus doesn't want to be noticed by anyone right now. Except that someone does. A non-Jew. A woman, no less. Two strikes against her already! A devout Jewish man is not to be

in the company of someone such as she. But she comes to Jesus and pleads for him to cast out the demon that is causing her daughter such misery. And Jesus refuses. He didn't refuse all those Jewish people who came out to see him in Galilee. Why say no now? But what's worse is how he said no. Not "I'm a little tired" or "Come back later." He refuses, and the finality of his words is offensive: "*Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" It is clear Jesus understood his mission was to rescue the people of Israel, God's chosen people, the Jews—these were the children to whom he referred. These were the people he was to redeem and bring back into life with God. He was to fulfill the prophets' prophecies and God's promises made so long ago to Israel. So great was Jesus' devotion to that mission, so great was his obedience to the will of God the Father, that the Syrophenician woman's request was considered outside the boundaries of his responsibility. She was not one of God's children. She was not one of the chosen. It's as if Jesus, so resolute and determined, had blinders on—could only see ahead to Galilee, then only see ahead to Jerusalem and the cross—and **did** not see or maybe did not **want** to see people on the periphery who might make him deviate from fulfilling his mission.

The woman has an answer to Jesus' refusal: "*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.*" Note she doesn't ever claim to be one of the "children." She doesn't assert herself as chosen or elected or special, or pretend to be anything other than what she is. Yet she claims for her daughter the very same grace and power of God promised to the chosen. Now, is that merely *chutzpah*? A boldness and assertiveness to beg for something she has no right to possess?

Or rather, is it this? *She is finishing Jesus' sentence.* She is bringing Jesus' mission and purpose to its natural conclusion. Not that she has the benefit of years of knowing and hearing Jesus. But apparently she knew enough about his life-giving ways and words—enough to understand what those words could mean for her demon-possessed daughter. Enough to know that, somehow, God's will from before time began was that even dogs like her would experience the fullness of new life in Him.

Here in Mark's Gospel, Jesus does not commend the woman for her faith, though it appears evident to us that she believes something about him. Instead, he appears to commend her for her insightful, audacious retort to him. He appears to change his mind about not healing her daughter, and goes ahead and casts out that demon anyway. It seems to me that Jesus does this because he sees her words as finishing his sentence. He recognizes her retort as the playing out to its natural conclusion **everything that he is about**. Jesus realizes this is not a deviation from his mission, but the logical extension of it—and, in fact, the most perfect expression of it. Take Jesus' compassion, take his power, take his love and then take it to the nth degree—plot out the line and extend it as far as it can go, and it will reach this Syrophenician woman and her daughter...and then it will keep on moving, even beyond them ...

And if there is any truth to this, then it means that no one is outside the boundaries of Jesus' mission to give life. No one is somehow left on the periphery of his gracious love which extends into all places and forth into all time. God wears no blinders, but sees all of us, each of us, in our needs and our heartaches and our yearnings, and what God purposed for his long-ago elected children He has also purposes for you and me. In numerous places in the Old Testament we can

find that truth, but listen to how it reads in the 2nd chapter of Isaiah: *“In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’”* (Isaiah 2:2-3) The good news of life in God is not simply for the elected children of God, but is good news for all. That is indeed God’s purpose, as voiced through Isaiah, and then, as lived out through our Lord Jesus Christ in this very strange Gospel lesson.

Funny how things happen. I was all set to tell you a story of a woman I read about in a journal recently. I’d actually cut out the article, which was several pages long and stapled it together. I was looking through it again this week, figuring out how I’d use it, when I turned the first page over, and saw the last few paragraphs of some other article from that journal, written by I-don’t-have-the-vaguest because I only had the remnants of that article. But the author was quoting a sermon by the late Episcopalian Bishop Walter Dennis who said something that, the more I looked at it, the more I realized those remnant words I discovered on the back of the other story **were** the story for today. This is what Bishop Dennis preached: *“...there is no issue, no creature, no institution, no action that is beyond the reach and concern of our ministry. There is no forbidden work, there is no corner of existence, no matter how degraded or neglected, in which you may not venture. There is no person however beleaguered or possessed you may not befriend or represent. There is no cause, no matter how vain or stupid, that you may not witness to peace. There is no risk, however costly or imprudent, that you may not undertake. That is the Gospel.”*

Bishop Dennis was telling his parishioners to finish the sentence of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He was telling them to take Jesus’ love and compassion and power to its natural conclusion.

So now, what if **we** took Jesus’ words, Jesus’ teachings, Jesus’ love and compassion and power to its natural conclusion in our daily living? We’ve spent enough time with our Savior to know his life-giving ways. We’ve learned enough from the stories of our Lord to begin to understand what he would say next. We’ve prayed enough for his Holy Spirit to fill us. It’s time to take Jesus’ compassion, power, love—take it to the nth degree—plot out that line and see where **we** go with these precious gifts from God. Maybe tutor a child in an inner-city school. Maybe help build a home with Habitat for Humanity. Maybe visit someone who is lonely or grieving. Maybe reach out to a member who’s drifted away from Trinity and encourage them to come back. Maybe donate to a food pantry. Maybe actually sit down with someone with whom we disagree and struggle together to find common ground. Maybe pray—regularly. Whatever we do, it’s time—time for us to complete Jesus’ sentence! **AMEN.**

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