

Justa, John Duns Scotus, and God's Justice
A Sermon on Mark 7:24-37 by the Rev. Philip Major
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A woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him, and she followed Jesus into the house and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. He 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."

It appears to me that Jesus is telling this woman that her little girl must go to the end of the line. It appears Jesus is saying God's healing grace is intended for his people, for the Jews. It appears Jesus is thinking God favors the Jews over the gentiles.

But the woman answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then Jesus said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So the woman went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

I may be wrong, but it appears Jesus is learning something about God's way that he did not understand before. It appears to me that at one time Jesus did not understand God's grace and healing are for every person, no exceptions.

It appears to me that Jesus just learned a lesson. This would make a lot of sense because we say that Jesus was a real person, just like us. In Luke chapter 2 there is a story of Jesus as a teenager. It ends with these words, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and years." We have to learn lessons, and it seems Jesus had to learn some lessons too.

This is why we are here today. We are here because we do not know everything. We are here because we understand we must be changed. Somehow we must be changed by coming closer to God's truth and love, just as Jesus was changed and came closer to God's truth and love in this story.

There are times when we think we know how things are supposed to be done. No matter how much experience or training we have, we never know exactly how things are supposed to be done. No matter how hard we have worked on a problem, we do not know all of the solutions to the problem.

It is very good for us to work and be persistent with the problems we face. It is very good for us to gain more experience, to seek out more training. It can even be good for us to lay awake in our beds at night, thinking about solutions to the problems of our lives. But no matter how many nights we have lain awake in our beds thinking and worrying, we will never know everything about the best way to bring the most love and goodness into the situations we face.

We have good and bad examples of this all around us. We see the bad examples especially in some of our leaders. Some of our leaders seem to think that they are better than Jesus, they seem to think they do not ever need to learn a lesson.

We see some good examples of the way we need to learn a lesson in our children. This is one of the reasons why I love being around children; most children understand they do not know everything. Therefore, they have a special receptivity to God's grace and love. This is why young people are our greatest gift; they are the examples we follow as we try to understand and live in God's grace and love.

We need to keep learning. We need to be open. And we need to keep seeking this indescribable mystery we call God's grace. What do we learn about God's grace and love in this story from the Gospel of Mark?

We learn God's grace and love are for everyone. We learn that for God it is not ok to tell someone they have to go to the back of the line just because they belong to a different group. We learn that God's love is powerful, that God's love heals people.

We learn more about God's grace by paying attention to the woman. Her name is Justa. Justa is a gentile, which basically means she is not Jewish. The fact that she is described as being of Syro-Phoenician origin tells us that Justa is a foreigner but she is a foreigner from a region right next to Galilee, the northern part of Israel. For us this would be similar to talking about our neighbors in Ontario.

We make a big deal about crossing the border into Ontario. God does not care about our petty little borders. God's grace is for everyone, for the natives and for the people across the border.

We learn that there is an interaction between our actions, and God's grace and love. Justa argues with Jesus. That is when God's grace breaks into the earthly struggle. Like her, we also have to be willing to risk something. We have to be pursue the difficult task.

One of my favorite heretics from an earlier time in the church was John Dun Scotus. John was born in the town of Duns in Scotland about 750 years ago. That is why he is called John Duns Scotus. John was a priest of the catholic church, at least he was a priest until he the bishops learned what he was preaching and writing.

John Dun Scotus seems to have been the first person to read the story of Jesus and Justa and come to a powerful conclusion about our human decision making. John Dun Scotus wrote that God's grace works through an interaction of God's will and human will. We have to do our part and God will do God's part. We have to make the right choices and God will make the right choices. This is how God's grace works. God's grace cannot have an effect in our lives if we do not make a choice to let it have an effect.

John Dun Scotus learned and taught this powerful truth about free will. For this he was branded a heretic, banished from the catholic church and chased by bishop's soldiers through the various kingdoms of Europe until he died.

God's way is goodness. But God's grace cannot have an effect in our lives if we do not choose to be part of God's goodness. God is not controlling every little part of life. But God is completely about goodness. We never completely know or understand God's way or God's goodness. We are trying to be part of that goodness.

There may come a time when you are discouraged. There may come a time when it seems like someone with a lot of power is keeping all of the good things from happening. Those bad things happen because God created us with the ability to choose right and the ability to choose the wrong thing. Sometimes people make bad choices. Sometimes people do not understand they still need to learn some lessons. Sometimes people seem to think they are better and wiser than Jesus.

We cannot stop other people from making bad choices. We cannot stop other people from using their power in terrible ways. But most of the time, no matter what terrible things might be happening to us, we are still left with the possibility of making the best, most powerful choice. That is the choice to love each other and take care of each other. Love is the most powerful, most valuable thing we have been given.