



*Good News in the midst of Bad News*

September 5, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Fifteenth Sunday after  
Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector  
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*Oh Lord, may your word only be spoken and may your word only be heard: in the name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen*

Earlier this week, Jamie and I were sitting in bed reading. Or I should say, I was drifting off, and she was getting ready to read a bit of the newspaper before she turned out the light. She asked me, “Is there any good news to read?” Having read the paper earlier in the day, I mumbled, “No, not really.” She sighed and turned out the light.

We are surely in need of Good News. Unstoppable fires, fierce hurricanes, rising Covid cases, a mess in Afghanistan, a crisis in South Africa, a water emergency in the American west, and so forth.

So, it was a little disappointing to have this Gospel passage on the docket. It may be the passage in the Gospels that makes me more uncomfortable than any other. More uncomfortable than passages where Jesus talks about money, the demands of discipleship, justice, divorce, about heaven and hell. Where’s the Good News?

As far as I can tell, it is the only passage in the Gospels where Jesus seems plain old mean. We were talking about this passage in the Men’s Prayer Group, and someone said, “It’s like finding out that Mr. Rogers once shouted at children to get off his stretch of beach in Nantucket.”

Interpreters throughout the ages have tied themselves in knots trying to airbrush away the harshness of this picture.

We’re asked to imagine the facial expressions and tones of voice of both Jesus and the woman, and to imagine they are engaged in a teaching session for the benefit of the disciples. In this interpretation, the disciples are being guided into a broader understanding of the reach of Jesus’ mission. Jesus and the woman already understand this but are playing this game to convince the disciples. That seems like a stretch to me.

Other commentators try to soften the encounter by pointing out that the Greek word for dog that Jesus uses actually means something more like puppy or lap dog. Still... a dog is a dog, and, apologies to dog lovers here—it is still an insult.

Others say that Jesus was exhausted, or that he was treating a non-Jewish woman the way any other Jewish man would have in the first century.

And yet, if we persist in trying to soften the hard edges of this passage, we may not receive the full good news of the Gospel.



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**First, the passage emphasizes the humanity of Jesus.** Our Anglican tradition embraces the paradoxical nature of Jesus as expressed in the Creeds and in the Gospels—he is *fully* divine and *fully* human. It is a rich combination, not neat and tidy, but full of power to reveal and nurture the divine image that resides in each of us.

Elsewhere in Mark, we see divine Jesus, stilling storms, walking on water, healing bodies and casting out demons. Here, we see someone who is more recognizable as one of us. Maybe Jesus is exhausted, perhaps unsure of where his ministry is to go. Perhaps he is trying to recover from the conflict with the authorities that has clearly begun—we remember his run-in with the Pharisees last week. Maybe he is trying to escape to a Gentile place where he figures he will be left alone.

I don't know about you, but it helps me to see Jesus as more like you and me—sometimes impatient, and yet who always have the potential to engage a person in need even when we may not feel like it.

**Second, the picture** of Jesus that we get in this passage can also tell us about the way the Church in the first century grappled with its sense of mission. Jesus' initial response indicates Jews first—that's the meaning of the phrase “the children” in the passage.

We have to remember that the early Church community crafted these Gospel accounts at least a generation after Jesus' Resurrection. Their collective memories and experiences of Jesus were colored by the questions and controversies they were experiencing. As the Jesus movement grew in numbers and strength, and spread out from Jerusalem, it was forced to ask itself—who was the Good News of Jesus for? Was it for Jews or Gentiles, or both? Did Gentiles have to become Jews first in order to become part of this new fellowship? If so, what parts of being Jewish did Gentiles have to take on? Dietary Laws? Circumcision?

I think those questions are seen in microcosm here in the picture of Jesus having the same struggle, and finally deciding to throw the gates open to all humanity. Jesus in this story represents the shift of the church itself in the first generation of believers.

We in the church have not been strangers to these kinds of controversies in our own lifetimes—what is the status of gay, lesbian and transgender people in the Church? What about women? Divorced people? African Americans and other ethnic minorities?

Though many of us in the Episcopal Church may have made up our own minds on these questions, some of these issues continue to stir up serious tensions, most recently, for example, in the way we understand, discuss, and work for racial justice.



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**Finally, people on the margins matter to God.** Thanks to the Syrophenician woman's persistence and his openness, Jesus finds himself actualizing in his own life the teaching that we heard last week; remember, last week he declared all foods clean. This week he declares *all* people worthy of God's healing, love and justice—even a pushy, single, non-Jewish woman. In fact, we might say that this unnamed woman and her wit, her gutsy riposte, her persistence, drastically redirects the focus of his mission. Geographically, after his encounter with her, rather than return directly home to Galilee, he continues to widen his mission and goes way out his way: the second healing this morning, of the deaf man, takes place in the Decapolis, a region of non-Jewish settlements east of the Galilee.

In the face of all of what seems like bad news, these are pieces of good news I can hold onto: Jesus is human like me. I can widen my circle of compassion. People on the margins matter to God. They make things happen. They can change hearts, if we pay attention, like Jesus did.

**Amen.**