

Forever Young
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*In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities,
in the expert's mind there are few.*
—Suzuki-roshi, Zen Master

Reading: Mark 7:24-37

I can think of no other passage in the Bible more perplexing than this one of the Syrophenician woman.

This story starts out by saying that Jesus is in the region of Tyre. Now, if you get out your map you will see that this is way to the north, about as far away from Jerusalem as Jesus ever was. It was Gentile country. Just the fact that Jesus went to this geographic area speaks volumes. Jesus was stretching the boundaries of the religious community just by going there.

O.K., so here is Jesus, and he's tired. It says that he didn't want anyone to know that he was there; he wanted a little peace and quiet. And this woman approaches him. A Gentile woman. She wanted Jesus to help her daughter. I suppose that all of us, in some way, can understand how Jesus might have been in a bad mood, a little testy even. But who could have ever anticipated what words the gospel writer attributes to Jesus here? He tells her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs!"

What? I'm sorry, but every time I read this I have a hard time believing that Jesus would ever say such a thing. I'm not the only one. In this quote, it has traditionally been understood that the "children" refer to the Jewish people, the "chosen" people of God, and the "dogs" refer to the Gentiles. This is an exclusive statement, much as the same that is found in Matthew where Jesus is portrayed as saying, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt. 15:24). In other words, Jesus wanted nothing to do with the Gentiles, those dogs!

Many scholars think that these words reflect a basically Jewish perspective which came out of the early Christian community. Some have thought that the gospel of Mark, written some 75 years after the death of Jesus, sometimes intermingles sayings of the *community* with the authentic sayings of *Jesus*. There are other derogatory references to Gentiles, such as "Don't give what is holy to dogs, or cast your pearls before swine" (Mt. 7:6). Whatever you may think about how the gospels were written, it is very difficult to reconcile these sayings with the rest of the teachings of Jesus.

O.K., back to the story. The woman ways to Jesus, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” What a smart-alec thing to say! She takes this metaphor of children and dogs, and she throws it right back to Jesus.

And so here we have Jesus acting very humanly. And Jesus’ response to the woman’s zinger? The translation goes something like, “Well said,” or “touché.” “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter,” he says.

Jesus is gracefully corrected by one of those “dogs,” and a female one at that! What we have amounts to an admission from Jesus with good humor and humility.

And so, Jesus demonstrates something very important for us all, and that is *a willingness to learn*. In Jesus, we encounter a certain *flexibility*, and we see in him *a teachable spirit*.

Stephen Mitchell sees a connection between the character of Jesus and the teachings of other great spiritual leaders such as Lao-tzu, who wrote:

*Humans are born soft and supple;
dead, they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
dead, they are brittle and dry.*

*Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible
is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding
is a disciple of life.*

“As soon as we blame other people or refuse to acknowledge our own fallibility, we step outside the kingdom of God,” writes Mitchell. “There is nothing wrong with making mistakes; the trouble comes with making mistakes about our mistakes.”

Lao-tzu continues:

*The more powerful you grow,
the greater the need for humility.
Humility means trusting the Tao (the way),
thus never needing to be defensive.*

*When the Master makes a mistake, she realizes it.
Having realized it, she admits it.
Having admitted it, she corrects it.
She considers those who point out her faults
as her most benevolent teachers.*

(*The Gospel According to Jesus*, Stephen Mitchell, p. 208)

There is something holy about this kind of malleability, about being so teachable, about this kind of flexibility, openness and non-defensiveness. Jesus himself talks about this when he says, “Unless you become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” This childlike openness and ability to learn is needed to realize our true humanity.

This teachable spirit is what makes the church holy, according to the father of the Reformation, John Calvin:

*The church is holy, then in the sense
that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect.
It makes progress from day to day
but has not yet reached its goal of holiness.*

Theologian Paul Tillich referred to this teachableness as the “protestant principle.” That is the giving up all pretensions to having absolute knowledge.

The apostle Paul wrote that totally full vision does not happen on earth: “We now see through a glass dimly.” Our sight is distorted, fragmentary, clouded. Perhaps later, when we no longer walk upon the earth, shall we see “clearly” and “face to face,” he said.

Hearing the Word of God means that we decide, in the words of Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggeman, not to “congeal.” It means that we are open and ready to be changed.

A novel by Gail Godwin (*The Finishing School*, 1988) contains a conversation about congealing. One character, Ursula, instructs the narrator, Justin:

“There are two kinds of people,” she once decreed to me emphatically. “One kind you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very nice self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas the other kind keeps moving, changing. With these people, you can never say, ‘X stops here,’ or ‘Now I know all there is to know about Y.’ That doesn’t mean they’re unstable. Ah, no, far from it. They are fluid. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must be constantly on your guard, Justin, against congealing.”

Suzuki-roshi, a Zen master, said,

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are few.

One might say that to be advanced in things spiritual means always to be a beginner. It means that we don’t congeal. It means to be open, willing molded, teachable. To grow out of this is to grow out of God.

No I want you to understand that not congealing, not having a beginner's mind, not being like children—I want you to understand that this have very little to do with chronological age!

One can be rigid, inflexible, brittle and dry when one is quite young. One can be congealed in one's 20's or 30's, unable to learn in a spiritual way.

And on the other hand, one can be soft and supple, tender and pliant when one is at a very advanced age. One can be teachable and open like a child well into one's 80's or 90's.

In a previous congregation I've had someone tell me, "I'm too old to learn anything new." Jesus, of course, would never buy this. When it comes to the spiritual quest, one never retires, one is constantly changing and moving forward.

At the end of this service we'll hear Bob Dylan's "Forever Young," as great a benediction as I've ever heard. And when you hear it, I don't want you to focus on chronological age; I want you to think *spiritual youth*.

During an interview, film director Michael Lessac told an old story:

There are two children in a family, and the younger has just been born. The older child keeps saying to the mother, "I want to be alone with her for awhile. Can I go in there alone with my sister?" And she's only a little baby. The mother doesn't understand, but the kid just keeps on asking, "I really want to—can't I just spend some time alone with the baby?"

So the mother lets the child into the room and listens at the door. And the child asks the baby, "Tell me about God. I think I'm forgetting."

You know, when it comes to things that are eternal, we don't know near as much as we think we do. But that's O.K. It's part of being human. And we should not resist this, but rather we should accept and embrace our humanity. And if we loosen up, if we open ourselves up like a child, if we don't congeal, we will have things revealed to us, like Jesus, even by the outcasts, outsiders, "dogs" of this world.

So may we cultivate the beginner's mind, the teachable spirit and the humble attitude. And may we all stay forever young.

Charge and Benediction (sung)

God bless and keep you always,
May your wishes all come true,
May you always do for others
And let others do for you.
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.

May you grow up to be righteous,
May you grow up to be true,
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you.
May you always be courageous,
Stand upright and be strong,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.

May your hands always be busy,
May your feet always be swift,
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift.
May your heart always be joyful,
May your song always be sung,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.

("Forever Young," by Bob Dylan)