

Continuing Conversion

Mark 7:24-30

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 29) 2018

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Barbara Ehrenreich in her new book, *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer*, tells of a moment ten years ago while reading a *Scientific American* article that was so deeply upsetting that she could only think, “This changes everything.”

Ehrenreich, who is a trained biologist, says that the article explained that the standard understanding by 20th century biologists was that “the immune system constantly monitored the cells it encountered, pouncing on and destroying any aberrant ones.” This monitoring work, called immunosurveillance, guaranteed that the body would be kept clear of intruders, or any kind of suspicious characters, cancer cells included.” She went on, but it has become “increasingly evident that the immune system was not only giving cancer cells a pass and figuratively waving them through the checkpoints. Perversely and against all biological reason, it was aiding them to spread and establish new tumors throughout the body.” She had always thought these cells, these macrophages, “were her friends,” but this article explained that they were not.

She said everything she thought she knew was changed. Everything she assumed before was out of control (see Barbara Ehrenreich, *Natural Causes*, p. ix-xv).

Or take theologian Miroslav Volf’s comments in his book, *Exclusion and*

Embrace, in which he recounts the standard modern and western narrative of civilization that says that with the emergence of democracy during the Enlightenment, nations and societies have become increasingly inclusive. “First the middle classes, then working men, then women, then racial minorities all have won economic rights but also political and social rights as well” (p. 58-59). In other words, our story is of progressive and ever-expanding inclusion. And as we are educated we learn to be inclusive.

Volf then asks, “But how adequate is the modern story of inclusion’s triumph?” (p. 59). Especially since the Holocaust, historians, theologians, sociologists, and psychologists have begun to reassess this standard story. Volf comments, that what we are learning is “the undeniable progress of inclusion fed on the persistent practice of exclusion (p. 60). That evil is mixed right in with the good and often, the good was built upon evil. He says that it is as if we are accustomed to seeing ourselves in a kind of magic mirror, which reflects back to us a kind of instant face-lift to make us feel that history has a purpose that in some way corresponds with our more positive understanding of human potential (p. 59).

In everything from the Holocaust to our contemporary Me-Too Movement to the Black Lives Matter Movement, from what we are learning about American chattel slavery and what we continue to learn about racism and White Supremacy and White Privilege and White Blindness to what we are learning about our American genocide of Native Americans, and genocide in the Balkans and in Rwanda, we are finding ourselves before a mirror that reflects back to us more of a truthful image. And we it is not a pretty picture.

Everything is changing. And furthermore, we are not in control.

Our friend writer and theologian Rodney Clapp, who led us in a church retreat several years ago, says that one day he looked out of his window in downtown Chicago on a bitter winter day and saw two African women inching along on an icy sidewalk. Apparently new to the climate, they were clad brightly in thin cotton robes. Their robes whipped in the wind and lashed their ankles as they clung to one another and moved painstakingly toward shelter. Rodney said he could see in their faces the shock and fear and he realized they had probably never before walked on ice or faced such winter winds. They had lived their whole lives in a more hospitable climate and always had trusted the ground beneath their feet (from Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, p. 9).

We live in a time where it seems that everything is changed, where the ground under our feet is different from what we have known. The changes might be bad or good or just different, but they do make us uncomfortable. We can build walls, and retreat behind them. We can try to rebuild typewriter factories and reinstall Fotomat shops around town. Many people would be more comfortable if we went back to pre-1954 and re-segregated our schools, which with school privatization we're doing anyway. We can try to retrieve the old, familiar life and understanding of life or we can venture forward and face the changes.

As in all things we look to Jesus to guide us.

In our lesson for this morning, Mark tells us that Jesus was near Tyre, about 40 miles northwest of Galilee, which is Gentile country. It sounds like Jesus needed a break; a little quiet retreat time but even way up north in foreign territory people knew who he was.

A woman who had a sick daughter came to him asking him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Now Mark is very clear; the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. Jesus was a Jew, all of his disciples were Jews and his entire ministry had been with Jews and here comes a Gentile, a Syrophenician seeking his healing. She begs for his help and Jesus' reply is very unusual. Matthew says Jesus was silent, as if he was ignoring her. But here, Jesus is very direct, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

When he said "children" he meant the Jews and when he said "dogs" he was referring to this woman, her daughter, and all Gentiles (like us). Now, I don't know about you, but I am not so sure I like what I am hearing Jesus say and we have been raised to always like whatever Jesus says.

It has been interesting to read different commentaries about what he said. Every one of them cannot bear to admit that Jesus is rude to the woman; he is curt, brusque, saying to her, "You go on. This kingdom of God stuff I'm talking about is not for you."

But this woman will not take no for an answer. She knows what he is saying and is clever enough and persistent enough (those persistent women!) to turn it around and say, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She is referring to the common practice that people ate with their right hand and they would wipe their fingers on bread and whatever bread was not eaten was scraped off the table for the dogs.

Pause a moment and consider this woman's persistence in faith. She gets a hold of Jesus and won't let go. Just because the going gets a little tough with Jesus does not mean she gives up and decides to stay home on Sunday morning. Or decides that she doesn't believe in God anymore. Or decides that she's going to be "spiritual" but not a churchgoer anymore. No, gets in there and argues it out.

And lo and behold, Jesus changes his mind. He responds to her and heals her daughter...

Mark tells this story here in Chapter 7 and Matthew records it in Chapter 15. What does this mean? Why did Mark and Matthew think it important to remember this story?

I'll tell you what I think. I think that in the middle of this exchange with this Gentile woman Jesus says to himself, "This woman changes everything. This woman is showing me something I did not see before." This Gentile woman helps Jesus realize that the kingdom of God, which Jesus proclaims and embodies, is bigger than he has ever thought. The Kingdom, his ministry, is not just for Jews; it is for all people!

Notice how Jesus responds to this woman. He debates her but he is also open to her. He does not write her off, he does not consider her his enemy, he doesn't storm off; he listened. Jesus' whole life was habituated to listening to God and to listening to others. That is what the Incarnation was all about. God in Christ became human and lived among us, not only so we might know God but also so God might know us.

This woman helps Jesus become aware of the implications of his ministry. You see, the Kingdom of God, and what Messiah-ship meant did not enter full-blown and fully developed into Jesus' mind at age 12 or even at his baptism. Instead, over time, as Jesus followed the will of God, as he prayed and studied the Scriptures and ministered to hurting people and walked alongside hurting people, as he called disciples to follow him, and as he dealt with growing opposition – through all of this, as he was on the go, he learned more and more about who he was and what his ministry was to be.

Jesus shows us that he too was being converted. He shows us how to deal with change, with new ideas, and he shows us how to deal with challenges that we did not see before. Jesus unlearned some of his assumptions and learned some new insights. We would do well to follow him in this as in all things.

For some of us, this understanding of Jesus and this understanding of how we know the will of God is un-nerving. Of all people, we expected Jesus to know it all ahead of time, to gather the facts, get it all straight between himself and God and then – and only then – launch out into what he was to do.

But Mark and Matthew tell us that is not God's way of doing things. Part of what Mark and Matthew show us is a very human Jesus, who is open to wherever God leads him, and is willing to change his mind. He is willing to be converted. The Gospel writers are also reminding us that there is no other way of knowing God without actively following God. We cannot sit back and analyze, and ponder and know anything about God without involving ourselves with and committing our lives to God. Knowledge of God is self-involving knowledge. We are to participate in the Way of Jesus. We jump in with Jesus.

And the nature of the Christian life is that as we follow this Jesus, we learn to see more and more of what it means to be his followers. We learn to see differently. We begin to see things in our own lives we have been blind to. We discover things that we might not like or which make us uncomfortable. We discover that we are complicit. Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, “We are not all guilty but we are all are responsible.” All of this might mean it is as if the ground beneath our very feet has shifted.

Perhaps we thought conversion was a one-time event when we were young, so we were baptized, and then went on with our lives. But the Way of Jesus is not like that. Conversion is a lifetime journey. It is a lifetime journey of being changed into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

As an example, go back and look at Peter in the New Testament. How many times was he converted? Early in the gospels, he is fishing and mending nets along with his brother Andrew. Jesus comes along and says, “Drop your nets and come and follow me.” And Peter does. He drops everything and follows. Later at Caesarea Philippi he is asked the blunt question of who Jesus is, and Peter says, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God!” (Matthew 16:16). He is being converted more and more.

At the last supper with Jesus, Peter proclaims that he will never forsake Jesus, but just a few hours later, he does that very thing when Jesus is arrested. Then during Jesus’ trial, Peter is outside around a fire and when he is confronted about being a follower of Jesus, he denies it three emphatic times. Yet after the resurrection Jesus takes a walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee with Peter,

forgives him and tells him three times to “Feed my sheep” (John 21). He is still being converted and changed.

Then Pentecost comes in Acts 2, with the fresh winds of the Holy Spirit, and Peter stands with great boldness and preaches a powerful sermon. In Acts 10, Peter receives a vision of a sheet lowered from heaven filled with non-kosher foods and a voice saying, “Take and eat.” Peter says, “I don’t eat non-kosher food.” The voice replies, “If God says it’s okay to eat, then it is okay to eat.” Peter realizes this means the good news of Christ is for non-Jews, too. He confesses, “Truly I realize that God shows no partiality. It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from – if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open” (Acts 10:34-35). Peter is converted – again. He sees that the good news of Jesus Christ includes Gentiles just like Jews.

But then over in Galatians 2, Peter and Paul are in Antioch eating supper with a bunch of Gentile Christians. Paul says that some Jewish Christians showed up from Jerusalem and Peter got up and ate only with the Jews. He acted like he didn’t even know the Gentiles. Furthermore, when Peter gave the Gentiles the cold shoulder, so did many other Jewish Christians like Barnabas, even though they knew better. Old Paul let them have it. He called them out and held them accountable to the gospel of Christ, the good news for all people. Peter is confronted with his hypocrisy. Again he is converted – and again and again.

Peter’s whole life is a continuing conversion. And it is rarely easy. Peter is a kind of case study of the entire church in the Book of Acts. They are faced with changes they never expected, and all of their assumptions are questioned and challenged. While at the same time, their presence and ministry creates change

around them wherever they go. For example, Acts 17 says that an enraged mob was searching for Paul and Silas, when they could not find them, they dragged any Christians they could find before the city authorities, shouting, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6).

We are to live in such a way in Christ Jesus that we turn the world upside down. But we also learn to live in Christ, in God so deeply that when our own worlds are turned upside down, we remain faithful and hang in there. We trust God and we trust each other. God in Jesus Christ – everything else pales in comparison.

The prophet Isaiah says, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God endures forever” (Isaiah 40:8). Everything changes. Everything passes away. Everything but God and our relationship with God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.