

## **“Insiders/Outsiders”**

Mark 7:24-37

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Mark’s gospel picks up where we left off last week---Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees about cleanliness rules. Jesus continues travelling around. He is steadily walking toward Jerusalem and his final days there. This week Jesus detours to the region of Phoenicia. He is going off to be alone, but he finds he cannot be alone. He cannot escape the people who are doggedly seeking him. Three times in today’s reading Jesus wants his presence and his power to be a secret.

His itinerary is far from secret and so we see him approached by two very different kinds of outsiders in these two accounts of healing.

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One of [the church’s] newer members, a man named Ken . . . is dying of AIDS, disintegrating before our very eyes. He came in a year ago with a Jewish woman who comes every week . . . although she does not believe in Jesus. Shortly after the man with AIDS started coming, his partner died of the disease. A few weeks later Ken told us that right after Brandon died, Jesus had slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon’s loss left, and had been there ever since.

Ken has a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiles, he is radiant. He looks like God’s crazy nephew Phil. He says that he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus, and us.

There’s a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, who has been a little standoffish toward Ken. She has always looked at him with confusion, when she looks at him at all. Or she looks at him sideways, as if she wouldn’t have to quite see him if she didn’t look at him head on. She was raised in the South by Baptists who taught her that his way of life—that he—was an abomination.

It is hard for her to break through this. I think she and a few other women at church are, on the most visceral level, a little afraid of catching the disease. But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he

was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face even more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke.

Still, during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, of how safe and happy he feels these days. So on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn, the so-called Morning Hymn, we sang "Jacob's Ladder," which goes, "Every rung goes higher, higher," while ironically Kenny couldn't even stand up. But he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap.

And then when it came time for the second hymn, the Fellowship Hymn, we were to sing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen—only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in his lap—and we began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?"

And Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up—lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. And it pierced me. I can't imagine anything but music that could have brought about this alchemy. Maybe it's because music is about as physical as it gets: your essential rhythm is your heartbeat; your essential sound, the breath. We're walking temples of noise, and when you add tender hearts to this mix, it somehow lets us meet in places we couldn't get to any other way.<sup>1</sup>

Writer Anne Lamott shares this story of insiders and outsiders, a story that in so many ways illustrates the gospel we just heard.

Who are the insiders in today's scripture? The Jews. Men. Jesus. Hebrews. The disciples. We don't often think of Jesus as an insider, because in the end he really was an outsider, but in these two stories he happens to be the insider.

Who are the outsiders? Greeks. Gentiles. Pagans. The possessed. Women and children. This woman who doesn't even have a name. Her daughter (also nameless). The handicapped. The infirmed. The outcast. This deaf, nameless man whose speech is so garbled you can only understand one word out of five. Can you just see his friends dragging his sorry form over to Jesus?

Who are the insiders? Who are the outsiders? These are the categories in today's scripture. But think for a moment about the categories of insiders/outsideers we know today. You may even want to write something down for yourself.

We are politically correct today, so of course we would never consider such groups as women, children, the handicapped, or people of a particular nationality as outcast. Or would we?

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<sup>1</sup> Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith (Anne Lamott)

There are places in our country, places in our town, places in our schools, and places in our own hearts where these very same divisions still play out. And there are other categories, some of which certainly existed in Galilee, too, though they are not the particular focus of today's gospel. Immigrant. Rich. Homeowners. Atheist. Republican. Welfare. Homosexual. Religious Right. Renters. Rebel. Born Again. Left Wing. Muslim. Liberal. Patriot.

What's odd about this gospel is Jesus is the INSIDER. As insider, Jesus treats the woman, the OUTSIDER, pretty rudely. What do we do with what Jesus said? It's pretty ugly.

*"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."*

He basically calls the woman a "dog". There's been plenty of scholarly energy put into explaining this one away, because this Jesus doesn't fit our Jesus-is-my-friend-who-answers-all-my-prayers image.

Maybe he was tired. Plumb empty. Could've been. He had gone there to be alone, after all. Certainly he was discouraged about how dense his disciples were. He had to be depressed about the deep shadows about to overtake him. Perhaps Jesus was trying to make a point. His job was to come and save the Jews, after all, not everybody. Paul had a heck of a time explaining that one away. Spent most of his preaching career rolling that particular stone uphill.

Scholars look for the historical context of the scripture. The smart people say Jesus the Jew was irritable about the two centuries of bad blood between the Phoenicians and the Hebrews. Maybe. Other smart people say Jesus was commenting on how the rich Phoenicians were taking advantage of the poor Jews in their neighborhood, a kind of reverse discrimination.

We will never know. All we know is something serious happened to Jesus in this exchange with the woman. He was pierced by her response to him. Jesus changed his mind. Maybe even his categories. We know this, because Jesus did an about-face. He healed with woman's daughter---the demon was gone without so much as a word.

It was a miracle. And then Jesus gets about as up close and personal as you can with a man who can barely talk.

Let's go back to Anne Lamott and the end of her story about Ken. She believed what happened was a miracle. Not a big miracle like Jesus exorcising a demon or opening the ears of a deaf person, but a miracle nonetheless. It's the kind of small miracle that continues to happen today.

We need to pay attention to these things. We need to celebrate these small miracles. Miracles that look like people changing categories. People letting go of prejudices. People letting down their guard. People sitting down across the table with people they don't agree with. People sharing the Lord's table with strangers and immigrants, like we do here. Laws changing. People getting out of prison; people

healing old wounds. Outsiders mixing it up with insiders, insiders helping outsiders, and in so doing, being helped themselves. A miracle, when nobody notices the difference anymore.

Here's what Lamott says:

I went back to thinking about Ken and my church and how on that Sunday, Ranola and Ken, of whom she was so afraid, were trying to sing. He looked like a child who was singing simply because small children sing all the time—they haven't made the separation between speech and music. Then both Ken and Ranola began to cry. Tears were pouring down their faces, and their noses were running like rivers, but as she held him up, she suddenly lay her black weeping face against his feverish white one, put her face right up against his and let all those spooky fluids mingle with hers.<sup>2</sup>

*Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue, and with a deep sigh, he cried out.*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.