
Not Lord Over Us, But Lord With Us

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*"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."
-Mark 7:27*

Does the person you admire ever embarrass you?

I love Clint Eastwood, for instance, but I have to admit that I was cringing as he appeared before the Republican National Convention two weeks ago in Tampa. What was he doing, talking to an empty chair, as if it were a nobody, and then rambling on in such an unscripted way?

I must admit, also, that I had the same premonition of embarrassment when former president Bill Clinton talked in an unscripted way before the Democratic National Convention last week. Bill Clinton is a lovable guy, and he can also be embarrassing.

My friends who know that I am a longtime admitted admirer of Clint Eastwood wanted to know how I interpreted his speech. Well, my analysis of Clint Eastwood was this. He reminded me of a cross between two people: an old impolite uncle at the family reunion, and the court jester. First, the old embarrassing uncle: he said some crude things, and some true things, and some rambling incoherent things, but I still liked him.

Second, the court jester. My sense is that it wouldn't have mattered who is the king; Eastwood would have jibes for whoever the person in power is. Neither Governor Romney nor President Obama probably ought to hire Eastwood as their campaign spokesperson! He is an actor, sort of like a court jester.

So, who were the early spokespersons for Jesus? You remember Jesus, the one whom we call Lord, and the One who is the reason we are gathering at our own campaign party this morning. Who were his campaign spokespersons? Who gave speeches on his behalf?

Well, there were lots of people who spoke. And some were really embarrassing, especially the lead guy, some fisherman named Peter, who kept getting the message wrong, and who actually betrayed Jesus on election night. But the message of Peter was probably never written down.

It was Saint Mark who first wrote it down. It is thought, of course, that Mark's gospel is our earliest written message, our earliest campaign message, of Jesus. Saint Mark, at chapter one, verse one, says he is writing down the full gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1).

Well, Saint Mark might have been a rather unscripted and unpredictable guy. Why else, would he include stories, in his

campaign speech, about how unreliable the disciples of Jesus were? And why, why in the world, does he include in his speech, the strange and embarrassing story of the Syrophenician woman which is today's gospel lesson?

Were you paying attention to this part of the speech? Jesus, walking through foreign region, comes across a woman who is not Jewish; she is a Gentile, from the area of Syrophenicia. She is not one of the chosen children of Israel. She is in need, desperate need, because her daughter has a demon.

And what does our candidate do? What does Jesus, the one we call Lord and Savior do? Well, according to Saint Mark (Mark 7:27), Jesus utterly disses her. He dismisses her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Whoa! Wait a minute there! Did Jesus really say that? Did he really call the Syrophenician woman a dog? And, even if he did, why did the first campaign spokesperson actually repeat the story? Why did Saint Mark include that embarrassing story in the gospel?

Even worse, it looks like the second campaign spokesperson did the same thing. Saint Matthew, who wrote after Mark, repeats the same incident, and Matthew adds even more detail! According to Matthew, it is the other disciples who complain to Jesus that she is bothering them (Matthew 15:23), and then Jesus actually pulls away from her, saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). And then, again, when the woman pleads, "Lord, help me," Jesus says again, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26).

This is embarrassing.

There are campaigns who would leave this out of the speech. There are religions who would leave this story out of the gospels, because the story presents Jesus as so immature, as so exclusive, in his mission. Jesus is saying that he was sent only to the lost children of Israel, and it would not be fair to give the children's food to the dogs. Jesus is calling the poor, desperate Gentile woman a dog, a nobody. This is embarrassing.

But something happens. Something surprising and campaign-changing occurs in our gospel today. Jesus changes his mind. Jesus changes his mind about the extent of his mission. He begins to realize that his mission is not just to his own kind, not just to his own tribe, not just to his own party, not just to his own religion, but to everyone.

And it is the woman, the foreign woman, who changes his mind. She, the foreign woman, actually argues with Jesus. "Lord," she says, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She comes right back at him.

Jesus is moved. Maybe even embarrassed. Jesus is alive. One of the main reasons that I claim Jesus as Lord is because I find I can actually live with Jesus, and I can move with him. I can grow with Jesus. I can develop. I can change.

I can change, because I note that Jesus himself changes. Yes, Jesus, himself changes in his life, and in his ministry. Our gospel today is a story about Jesus moving, about Jesus expanding his ministry, from the exclusive, to the all-embracing.

There are two kinds of God in this world. One is the rigid, static, absolutist God. The other is the growing, changing, and expanding God.

Our God is the second God. Our God is not just "Being;" our God is "Becoming." (In fact, that is one way the great Exodus 3:14 verse can be translated, the verse where God speaks from the burning bush to Moses, "I am who I am!" A valid translation of that verse is "I am becoming who I am becoming.")

Our God has to be a God of becoming. Not simply Being, as some absolutist and tyrannical and rigid force over the world. I know this God through knowing the Jesus of the gospels. I see Jesus change in the gospels. I see development.

Nowhere is this truth of Jesus' development more evident than in today's gospel. In fact, is not just evident. It is painfully evident. It is embarrassingly evident! Jesus is downright rude to the woman, until she responds to him with an amazing faith. So it is, that embarrassment is not a bad thing; it reveals things. It often reveals uncomfortable truths, truths which

change us for the better.

Note this: Even when she is arguing back to Jesus, even when she is coming right back at him, the Syrophenician woman actually calls Jesus "Lord" (translated "Sir" in the NRSV, but it is the same word!). When the woman says "Lord," she is not treating the Lord as something unchanging, and absolutist over her. She is arguing with him. She is actually treating him an equal debate partner. She is not afraid to have an open and frank discussion with him.

And this discussion is not over some nonchalant or inconsequential subject. The topic is Jesus ministry. Who is Jesus called to serve? This is a foundational question to Jesus! Who is he called to serve?

Jesus originally thought that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. But the Syrophenician woman disagrees. "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs from under the master's table." In that instant, Jesus' attitude changes, and Jesus has amazing respect for her. Great is your faith, he says! (Matthew 15:28)

Friends, this woman is a hero. The Syrophenician woman is a hero. She stands up to Jesus, argues with Jesus, and actually changes Jesus' mind! And she calls him "Lord" the whole time.

She is an example of faith for many reasons, and one of the reasons is that she shows us what kind of "Lord" Jesus actually is. Jesus is not Lord *over* us, nor Lord *above* us. Jesus is not absolutist and tyrannical Lord.

Jesus is Lord *with* us. With us. Someone we can argue with, and relate to, and even be embarrassed by. Jesus is someone we can love. Jesus is someone who can change with us, and who can model for us how to grow and expand into the world.

Sometimes, the best campaign spokespersons for us are the ones who go off script, who cause some embarrassment to us, who force us to change. I am glad Mark and Matthew both kept this story of the Syrophenician woman in their campaign speeches. She is our hero today. It is her faith that actually changes Jesus's mind.

And she calls him "Lord." Jesus is, truly, our Lord. Jesus is not Lord over and above us, though. Jesus is Lord with us.

AMEN.

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