

LISTENING TO THE WORLD

On this World Communion Sunday, we celebrate the sacrament that we share with Christians all around the world. We do this as a reminder that we are part of a global church that has been gathered together from the ends of the earth. Maybe you have heard the words of a communion liturgy that we sometimes we use, and that come from a 2nd-century text called the *Didache*: “As these grains of wheat were once scattered on the mountains, and after they had been brought together became one loaf, so may the Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.” (*Didache*, 9.4)

Having said all that, I want to read a story from Mark's Gospel. And it may not be apparent right off the bat what this story has to do with World Communion or grains of wheat scattered on the hills and gathered into one loaf. So, I ask you to just listen to story, and we'll see where it takes us a little later.

From there [Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Mark 7: 24-30

There is a collection of excerpts from the writings of Frederick Buechner called *Listening to Your Life*. And the title of that book comes from a theme that runs through much of Buechner's writings. He often says that the way God speaks to us is not the way we might have imagined it, or the way it often appears in Hollywood movies. We don't hear God as some deep, resonant, disembodied voice that sounds like James Earl Jones. God doesn't speak through lightning bolts from the sky. If God speaks to us at all, he says, it is often through the events of our lives—the ordinary and mundane moments of daily life, as well as the extraordinary moments and the times of crisis. So, if we want to be in touch with God, if we want to hear what God has to say, Buechner counsels us to be attentive to what is going on around us, to listen to our lives.

I think Buechner is on to something here, but on this particular day, I want to expand it a bit, and suggest that if we want to be in touch with the fullness of what God is up to in this world, the full spectrum of the presence of Christ in the world, we have to listen to more than just our own lives—we have to be in tune with the rest of the world as well. In fact, it may even be *more* important to listen to the world than it is to listen to ourselves.

So, what does it mean to listen to the world? And even more importantly, how do we hear a Word from God by listening to the world?

Well, that's where this odd story from Mark's Gospel comes in.

Jesus and the disciples had been making the circuit in Galilee, the northernmost region of Israel, and they had been dealing with large crowds of people in every little hamlet and village they came to. Jesus, being the real human being that he was, began to feel the need for some down time, and so they arranged for a retreat across the border into the province of Syria, and to a quiet little village where no one would know who he was. After all, these were Syrians and Phoenicians—Gentiles. They were not the chosen people. What would they know of the Messiah?

But the reputation of Jesus preceded him even there, and no sooner do they get there than this woman appears out of nowhere, throws herself at the feet of Jesus, and asks him to make her daughter whole again. And in a response that we may find somewhat shocking, he says "No, I can't heal your daughter." He tells her, "Let the children be fed first, for it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What he seems to say is, "I'm sorry; you're just not one of us. The claims that I am here to make on behalf of the kingdom of God are reserved exclusively for the children of Israel. I'm afraid you are outside the realm of David. I'm afraid *your* people have no more standing in the kingdom of God than the dogs."

Jesus had crossed many barriers in his ministry. He had never been one to let disease or class or gender or even questionable moral behavior stand in his way or prevent him from embracing even those who were considered untouchable by everyone else. But it seems that here he had come up against a barrier that even he was unwilling to cross.

This was nothing shocking to the disciples. It fell right in line with what they had been saying all along, that this kingdom of God idea was more about who was in and who was out. And *their* biggest concern was who got to sit at the head table—who was the most powerful and had the most prestige among the insiders.

So what happened next must have floored them. When Jesus says he can't heal the woman's daughter, without missing a beat, she shoots back at Jesus, "I beg your pardon, but, yes you *can* heal my Gentile daughter; because even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." I imagine that there was dead silence as jaws dropped. Not even the Pharisees, with all their skill in the debating, had ever gotten the best of Jesus! But something else happened in that moment, because he says back to her, "You know what? You're right." And he tells her, "Go back home and fix your daughter a nice bowl of chicken soup—she's going to be just fine."

Now we could conclude that this is a story about persistent faith. In fact, in Matthew's version of the same story, Jesus tells the woman that her faith is great. It could be a story about an assertive woman who just won't take "no" for an answer, a kind of "nevertheless, she persisted" moment. And we wouldn't be entirely wrong. But I think there is more going on here than just a squeaky wheel getting the grease. Some kind of change came over the situation when Jesus was confronted with a voice from the wider world.

I recently watched a new British comedy series called "Don't Forget the Driver." It tells the story of Peter Green, a tour-bus driver in Bognor Regis, a faded resort village on the southern coast of England. He is a single dad, estranged from the mother of his twenty-something-year-old daughter, and he fears that he is on the verge of losing her as well. He lives in a well-worn attached house in a rundown neighborhood, drives a beat up car that won't start unless you whack it with a hammer, and

divides much of his free time between helping his daughter find a job and get on her feet and helping his mother cope with the confusion and fear of advancing dementia.

Each episode of the series is framed around a different group of people he is driving to some outing or destination—a senior group visiting the war cemetery in Dunkirk, a Japanese tour group visiting Hampton Court, or an elementary school band out for a visit to Legoland. One of the creators of the series, the actor who plays the bus driver, says he got the idea for the show while he was observing people in uniform. Not military or police uniforms but service uniforms. He was particularly intrigued by bus drivers. He noticed that when they put on that uniform and assume their duties, they become almost invisible to those who board their bus, and yet they are called upon to assume an enormous responsibility for the life and safety and well-being of these complete strangers, most of whom barely acknowledge their presence.

Pete's life gets a bit more complicated when he comes back from a trip across the channel to France, and discovers a stowaway in the luggage compartment of his bus, a young woman that we eventually learn is a refugee from war-torn Eritrea. Suddenly Pete is confronted with assuming responsibility for more than just a temporary day-passenger on his coach.

He has every reason to walk away from this situation and to leave her to her own devices. He certainly has enough troubles of his own and no one would fault him for deciding that he just can't take on this added responsibility. He doesn't really have the time, the resources, or the emotional strength to reach out to a total stranger who doesn't even speak his language. But earlier in the day, as he was taking a morning walk on the beach, he stumbles on what turns out to be the body of a refugee migrant that had washed up on the shore of Bognor. And suddenly that sense of responsibility towards strangers stirs up something deeper within him. In his dreams at night, the body that he sees lying unclaimed on the shore bears his own face.

One of the best things about this series is that politics never enters into it in an overt way. It is not preachy or partisan. It is simply about the complex interactions of human lives, and how it becomes impossible to remain invisible and unresponsive to the wider world. It is a story of how Peter Green, an ordinary, beleaguered man who has spent most of his life hiding in a cloak of invisibility finds it within himself to do a small, decent thing outside the orbit of his narrow, contained world. It is not just about how he finds the courage to take a stranger into his home and into his chaotic life, but even more how he finds something of his own salvation in not only listening to but assuming some responsibility for a world that is wider than his own village and his own life. It is supposed to be a comedy, and there are some occasional funny bits in it, but I found the last few minutes of the final episode some of the most moving and poignant moments I have seen in a long time. It becomes the story about how a whole dysfunctional family and a community of people with broken lives find in their own brokenness something that calls them to listen to, to identify with, and to take responsibility for the brokenness of the world.

And more than just doing a good deed, they find healing in that moment.

And that is what this healing story in Mark's gospel is about as well. It is what ties this story to what we remember on World Communion Sunday. It calls us to listen to the gospel of Christ and what he shows us about assuming responsibility for neighbors, whether they are from across the

street or from around the world. It reminds us that we listen to the world because that broken world has been welcomed to Christ's table just as we have.

And we show the meaning of this table not by the crumbs under the table but by holding up the whole loaf of bread. And not just any bread, but *broken* bread, the broken body of Christ. But this broken bread is not a brokenness that defeats. It is not a brokenness that leaves us weak or depleted. Once, when the disciples wanted to protect and preserve the few loaves of bread they had, Jesus said, rather than looking out for your own interests, break up what you have and give it away, and then watch how it multiplies, and how it feeds us all. The bread that is broken here today is the bread of life—broken in love; broken in order to be shared; broken to feed, to nourish, to give hope.

Throughout Mark's Gospel Jesus repeatedly asks, "Don't you understand yet?" He asks not only the scribes and Pharisees but even his closest disciples. But in the end, there is only one person who finally gets it, who finally recognizes the true divinity of Christ, revealed not in a display of power and not in a prestigious institution, but in the weakness and vulnerability of the cross. And it is not a religious leader or even one of the disciples who recognizes this. The one who gets it is a Roman centurion at the foot of the cross.

We need to listen to others in the world because sometimes they understand the true nature God better than we do.

Let us pray:

One God of many names, One Christ of many faces, One Spirit moving through all the earth,
open our eyes and ears, our hearts and minds to the whole world
where your presence shines and where we are transformed. Amen.

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