

St. Anne's Parish, Annapolis, Maryland
Sunday, September 9, 2018
Text: Mark 7:24-27
The Rev'd. Dr. Timothy J. Mulder, Interim Rector
Sermon: Learning to Love...More

Have you noticed the school buses on the streets of Annapolis this week? The children are going back to school. Take a moment - who were your best teachers? For me, there was Mrs. Schaffer, who taught us to diagram sentences, Dr. Dreeland who showed us how to dissect a frog, and Ms. Thomas who taught African-American history. Then there was Ed Jousma, not a classroom teacher, but my boss for four years at the ski shop who taught me about work and treating everyone with respect.

When we learn, we become the possessors of something we never had before. A child learns to read; a scientist applies formulas and projects something that has never been and life changes. I recently listened to a Ted Talk on a Google X team whose job is to ask what are the greatest challenges facing humankind and how can we solve those problems? To learn is to go, whether in mind, body or spirit, where we have never been before, and in the going become a different person, a different people.

Paul Marshall, the retired bishop of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania once wrote that the purpose of faith is to change us and to change the world. Learning changes us.

But not all learning is intentional, and sometimes not even desired. In our Gospel today, Jesus learned, he did not teach, he was taught, something he had not set out to learn, something he resisted learning, because it changed him in a way he never thought he wanted to be changed. And because it changed him, we are here today.

On that day Jesus encountered someone who was not like him. She was Syrophenician, a Gentile whose family came to Israel by way of Egypt. She had a sick daughter and hoped Jesus could heal her.

Jesus tells her his work is to care for his own people, the Jews, that he can't do anything among her kind. She pushes back, and let me make a side comment here, almost every time in scripture that Jesus's mind and ministry is expanded, it is because some woman didn't stand for things the way they are and pushes back and insists the old ways change.

So this woman says, even dogs get the crumbs under the table. Well, there's the key: dogs! In her world, the Gentile world, dogs were pets, who lived in the house and ate under the table from a generous hand. But the Jews considered dogs wild beasts, not to be taken in or cared for. They were dangerous, and to be steered clear of, and there would be every incentive NOT to feed one.

Jesus had to move into someone else's way of seeing and doing to get this woman's push back about "even the dogs." It would not have happened if she would have just accepted his saying, "Sorry, can't do that, not for you."

This woman was saying, "Listen, you may not see me as your peer, as equal in deserving the life you have, as belonging here, even as loved by God. OK. Don't. But at least treat me as a dog. Toss my child a scrap of your healing power.

Something about this woman got through. It changed him. It changed the way he looked at her, and at her daughter, and once he had done that he began to see other people differently as well.

Jesus began to realize how small his vision and ministry and heart had been. Why only the Jews? Wasn't it possible God would love people who lived over the border as much as he loved those who lived here? Wasn't it possible God could care about justice not just for the Jews, but for people of other religions? Might he not need to rethink what he was doing with his life? Until at the very end of Matthew's Gospel he would say, "Go into all the world and make disciples." Quite a change.

Jesus changed his whole ministry because a lady pushed back and said, things need to be different here. Even the son of God could learn how to see people differently and treat people differently.

To change ourselves and change the world for the sake of loving all - not a bad reason to get up in the morning! And so I ask myself today, what do I need to learn to love more? How do I need to change? It doesn't usually happen in a classroom; more often with a stranger who pushes back when we think we have it all figured out.