

A Little Evangelical Geography

Mark 7:24-30

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(This sermon was preached at St. Stephen Church, Louisville, Kentucky, on Martin Luther King Day, 2016.)

I want to offer you some instruction in evangelical geography, that is, reflection on how the good news is always context specific.

I

In Mark 6:30–44 Jesus does his well-known feeding of 5,000. Remember that number, *six*! In 6:1, he is in Nazareth, and after that he is “among the villages,” all in Galilee. He has a quite extended ministry in Galilee, his home country. Except for a few Roman soldiers, Galilee was a place inhabited by small town and country Jews. It was a modest economy of a homogeneous population, most of them living in subsistence but making it, even while they paid taxes to the Jerusalem establishment that colluded with the Roman Empire. It was the kind of live-and-let-live of rural intimacy, all of one kind of people. They were economically vulnerable, but they were the religiously secure because they kept the commandments.

It does not surprise, in that peasant economy of Galilee, that some were not doing so well. It is no wonder that they chased after Jesus in hope. Even when he withdrew to a wilderness place for R and R, the crowd followed him, hoping for a wonder that would settle in well-being on their lives.

He of course does not disappoint them, because he has compassion for them. They are his own folks. In his compassion he taught them about an alternative way in the world that he called “the Kingdom of God.” And then he brings his kingdom talk down to bodily reality as he always does. No use to have grandiose expectations unless it matters on the ground. In front of him were hungry people in that Galilee wilderness. He fed them! They were like sheep without a shepherd, and he fed them like a good shepherd. He started with a little, five and two, loaves and fish. It is what they had in that small economy of Galilee.

And then he committed his lordly action that has become our most elemental mantra: he took, he blessed, he broke, he gave. He multiplied. He performed the Eucharist. No explanation, just testimony. No rational thought that all the crowd whipped out their lunches and there was enough. It was not a slight of hand. It was not a trick to be figured out and explained. It was a wonder. It was a declaration of the power of holiness that he embodied right in the middle of Galilee. Loaves abounded, and he shared them all around in that homogeneous Jewish population of his own kind. He assured that they had ample resources, 5,000 men! Add women and children who were also there but not recorded. And baskets and baskets of bread left over. It was in Galilee because in the next verse, the disciples are out in a boat on the sea in a storm, the Sea of Galilee, his venue for obedience and abundance.

II

A little more geography! At the end of chapter 7, we are told: “Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis (v. 31).” He was in the region of Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis, that is, out of Galilee. The Decapolis consists in ten cities that were built and inhabited by Greeks. We are not in Kansas anymore, or in Galilee. We are among non-Jews, Gentiles! He heals a deaf man there. Mark reports: “Immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly” (v.25). He spoke plainly... in Greek!

And then, in chapter 8, there was again a crowd of hungry people. Hungry Greeks, hungry Gentiles, hungry people not of his own kind. Remember that number: *eight*! You know how the story goes. He was moved to compassion when he saw Greeks without food for three days. He quizzes his disciples about available provisions. Seven loaves; they do not even report a fish. But if we reckon five loaves and two fish, we get seven. Either way, seven! And then he reperformed our treasured mantra, with a slight variation: he took, he gave thanks (not “bless”), he broke, he gave. He gave thanks. Only then does Mark remember: oh, there were also a few small fish. Add that to the seven. But they are few and small, so it does not really change the prospect for food.

They all ate. They were all full. There are abundant loaves. Four thousand people... this time not “men” but counting women and children. Well, maybe not just “men” because they are not Jews. Among Jews you count men as heads of households, but among Greeks, who knows who to count? In any case, an abundance, an unexplained abundance... no explanation, only testimony, only testimony that the power of Jesus is at work among Gentiles. Because Gentiles, for all their difference, have this in common with Jews: they get hungry. They need to eat. They arrived in the wilderness without food. They are the target of the compassion of Jesus. They are participants in the wonder of Jesus; Greeks, in all regards, in this narrative, are just like Jews. The numbers vary, 5,000 and then 4,000, twelve baskets and then seven baskets. But it is all the same. For Jews, he took, he blessed, he broke, he gave. For Greeks, he took, he gave thanks, he broke, he gave. The power of Jesus and the wonder of God are underway for Jews in Galilee and for Greeks in the Decapolis. He is the lord of abundance for both populations!

III

Don’t you wonder how the narrative gets from chapter *six* to chapter *eight*? Well, it is by way of chapter *seven*. Remember that number, *seven*! Do you wonder how the venue for multiple loaves changed from Galilee to the Decapolis, from hungry Jews to hungry Gentiles?

Well, consider chapter 7. At the outset Jesus has an extended dispute with the Pharisees and the scribes about cleanness and defilement, about ritual contamination and social rejection. They differ. The Pharisees think you become unclean by what you eat and take in. Jesus insists against that, that you become defiled from within, by attitude. Even given the dispute, however, both Jesus and his adversaries are pre-occupied with defilement and cleanness, a very Jewish preoccupation. Indeed, Jesus has been nurtured in a Jewish community that had all kinds of commandments about purity and cleanness and holiness, and he knew how it was all parsed. The purpose of

the purity regulations is to make a difference between “us” and “them,” between the good people who have access to the goodies of God and those who have no admission to those goodies.

Every society has access laws. The difference between folks may be determined by your dress or where you work or where you went to school or your accent or who your momma was or how much money you have. Purity laws are articulated by the managers of the goodies in order to guard access to the goodies, to give some preferential treatment and to deny it to others.

In Mark 7, when Jesus finishes his long dispute about purity, he goes to Tyre. It is as if he has to get away from Jews, so he goes to Gentile geography. He is confronted immediately by a needy woman. Mark reports, “Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syro-Phoenician origin” (v. 26). She is a non-Jew, just who you would expect in that region of Tyre! She was a non-Jew who is dangerous to the touch for a Jew. And she has a daughter who is occupied by an unclean spirit. She had heard of Jesus, and so she comes and asks him to do a healing wonder for her deeply distressed daughter.

But here is the rub. Jesus pushes her away. He says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (v. 27). In his code language, the “children” are the Jews—children of privilege, children of the chosen. The “dogs” are the Gentiles; by the label Jesus calls them by a bad name; he demeans them and diminishes their social significance. The chosen come first. The Jews are chosen and get first dibs. It would not be fair to take food that belongs to the chosen and give it to the Gentile dogs. Jesus is still embedded in the purity laws that the good people of God come first and get the goodies. He is a Jew and had not thought beyond his own Jewishness, his own racial-ethnic status. But his unreflective notion of Jewish chosenness is abruptly interrupted. This nobody of a disqualified woman confronts him and says, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v. 28). Even the dogs—the Gentiles, the non-Jews of Tyre—should get a crumb, should get a gesture, should get a healing. They are also eligible for a transformative miracle, because the wonder of God cannot be monopolized by the chosen people.

Her words are a massive assault on Jesus and his idea of being privileged and chosen as Jews. He has to be reeducated. He has to move out of his naïve notion of purity and chosenness. He has to notice the world beyond his own kind. He has to accept that the others count as well. Amazingly, he accepts instruction from the woman. He does not refuse to grow. He says, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter” (v. 29).

What a moment in the history of the world! This Jewish rabbi, perceived to be the Messiah, has to reach out to the others and has to engage his power for well-being to heal the other. He eradicates uncleanness for the Gentile girl. Does it take your breath away as it does mine that Jesus had to be instructed about the power of God for those who are not my kind? It is this bold defiant mother who so cares for her daughter that she will not let old racist distinctions determine who will get healing. She insists on healing beyond the narrow sphere of privilege.

IV

So here is the geography lesson of an evangelical kind. In chapter *six* Jesus does a food wonder *in Galilee for Jews*. In chapter *eight*, he does a food wonder for *Greeks*

in the Decapolis. From chapter six to chapter eight, he has changed venues and has distributed the goodies for people in a new region that, until that moment, he did not think should get even a crumb from the table of chosenness.

Jesus is able and ready to make this geographical move because of this instruction from a nobody of a woman who would not let him off the hook with his racial-ethnic bias that masqueraded as a religious scruple. She forces the issue. And Jesus exhibits his conversion by promptly going to the Decapolis. There he healed a deaf man, and then he replicated his feeding miracle, this time for Greeks. She had forced the issue. That is how we get from Jews to Greeks, from Galilee to Decapolis. Who knew? Who knew that Jesus had to grow and give up old socio-religious conviction for the sake of God's way in the world? The geographical move is forced by a nobody who would not let the Messiah rest in his comfort zone.

V

So consider this evangelical geography and how it might be narrated in Louisville. Imagine that the city of Louisville is divided into two zones as the old world was divided into two zones, Jews and Greeks. Imagine that there is a zone of privilege and purity and prosperity like there was in Galilee, with the necessary purity codes. That part of Louisville, like the chosen of Galilee, manages all the goodies and has access, guarded by the purity requirements of the race, class, wealth, and influence of the ownership class.

And imagine that there is another zone of Louisville, out West. That zone is regarded by the leading opinion makers in the city as impure, unworthy, undesirable, and dangerous to one's health and one's investments. It is for the opinion makers and the dispenser of goodies a no-fly zone, a no-go zone of disadvantage.

So imagine the two parts of Louisville, divided by rules of purity and defilement. In the proper part, miracles of abundance are performed all the time every day by corporations and by government with good services and good schools and even good grocery stores. It is not a surprise that the chosen should have such benefits—seven or twelve baskets of abundance left over all the time. The goodies properly belong to the prosperous ones, the chosen of privilege, never given to the “dogs” of defilement and uncleanness.

Well, as with Jesus, it is time to interrupt such uncritical assumptions and practices. It is time to move the festival of abundance from the zone of privilege to the zone of disadvantage, because all the loaves and fish of abundance cannot be kept in a zone of privilege that demotes all others to the status of dogs. Jesus had to reiterate his food wonder in the new zone where he had not heretofore thought to go.

That move from the zone of chosen privilege to the zone of disadvantage is not automatic. It is not ever done willingly. It is done only when this woman without pedigree, this woman and her allies, speak up and require a miracle of abundance for the dogs as for the chosen children. Jesus, without this insistent woman, would never make that move. He is, however, glad and ready to make that move when he has his world map redrawn for him. He is recruited into evangelical geography.

As a result I dare imagine that we today, in the wake of Martin Luther King, are on the move from chapter *six* (the zone of privilege) to chapter of *eight* (the zone of disadvantage) by way of chapter *seven*, the episode of confrontation and reeducation that permits reimagining how the bread is to be managed differently. We dwell in her

insistent protest: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v. 28). And we insist until we get a reassuring answer: “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” (vv. 29-30).

Nobody expected Jesus to be reinstructed, a converted Messiah. Nobody expects the leadership of privilege to be converted. But it happens! It happens because geography is not just settled into strict zones of abundance and disadvantage. Geography is an arena for Gospel transformation. It turns out that the Greeks of the Decapolis get their miracle of abundance. I have no doubt that such insistent instruction results in conversions and the redrawing of the maps of abundance. The future of West Louisville will be as recipient of abundance, much more than crumbs! Martin would expect us to interrupt settled geography. Martin would join us in the redistribution of bread and all manner of good things. God is the giver of many baskets of well-being, all that rich surplus that leads to well-being. This requires a gospel voice that recognizes that geography is not destiny. It is rather a matrix of abundance that depends on thanks and brokenness. Imagine, both *in Galilee among Jews* and *in the Decapolis among Greeks*, he took, he blessed, he broke, he gave. He still does!