

“Change of Heart”

1. Growing up, we think our parents and our role models can do no wrong.
 - a. We look up to them, we want to be like them.
 - b. And we even compare them to others – my parent is smarter than your parent!
 - c. But inevitably, at some point, we get to see past our initial assessment.
 - i. Our parent lets it slip that they made a mistake, or we catch them doing something they had said they’d never do.
 - ii. I remember clearly one time my saint-of-a-mother said something which didn’t sit right with me, and years later I realized she was expressing a racial bias, maybe even based on a racist fear.
 - iii. I could have rationalized it, and I did for years, but it never sat right with me.
 - iv. Eventually I came to terms with the fact that she had had some work to do, and ultimately I did see her show positive growth in that area.
2. Agreeing that Jesus is our ultimate role model, I have to say that today’s passage has never sat right with me.
 - a. It’s just shocking to read that Jesus compared the mother and the child in the story to dogs, and intended to ignore their very real concern.
 - b. Surely there are some layers here, some context which could help us understand.
 - c. Briefly taking a step back, we acknowledge in our theology that Jesus is fully human and fully God, as difficult as that may be to fit in our heads
 - i. The story’s harsh details aren’t sanded down, so we get to see the whole process
 - ii. In the early part of this exchange we read today Jesus feels so very HUMAN, as if Jesus had no larger gracious divine view.
 - iii. Or, more troubling, he seemed to state that God had meant all along to love one set of people first, or more, or only, over and above other peoples.
 - iv. Wow. Neither of those feel great.
 - d. Let me state the obvious, then: The reason this passage sticks out, not unlike mom’s comment I referred to, is that it feels so inconsistent with everything else we know.
 - i. Knowing what we know about Jesus, it just doesn’t sound right.
 - ii. Sure, Jesus lived in the social context of his era, but time and time again Jesus had upset expectations, built bridges, welcomed people pushed to the margins
 - iii. Earlier in this very gospel, Jesus had healed another person who also wasn’t Judean (Mark 5)
 - iv. So for this non-Judean woman seeking healing to be rejected, it just sticks out.
 - e. Then the woman boldly, cleverly pushes back. That was a twist!
 - f. Pause the narrative right there, and it reminds me of other older stories where the scriptures say that God changed God’s mind

- i. Remember? There was that one time that Moses talked God out to destroying the whole people of God, because they had worshiped the golden calf (Exodus 32:13-14)
 - ii. Or that one time when God decided not to destroy the Ninevites because they repented (thought it actually made Jonah mad) (Jonah 3:10)
 - g. So, maybe there is an echo here of those stories. It feels like a change of heart
 - i. Suddenly the main character is really the Syrophenician woman, who cleverly engages Jesus
 - ii. She is acting out of maternal protection for her daughter, and is bold in requesting healing, and even more so in turning Jesus' response around on him.
 - iii. She skillfully returned Jesus' words with such force, a rhetorical backhand over the net that Jesus acknowledged as a winning shot
 - h. And Jesus said: *Because of this word, go; the demon has come out of your daughter.*
 - i. Game. Set. Match.
- 3. This passage has bothered scholars so much for centuries, that they've tried to make it look like Jesus wasn't being so harsh, or that there was a certain order things had to happen, or some other way to make it look like Jesus was right at the beginning and at the middle and at the end of the story.
 - a. Yet as I point out, we have some passages in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) where it says that God changed God's own mind.
 - b. It may be difficult to understand how, if God is God, there would be an instance where God can start in one direction and then change course.
 - i. (and for that matter – why not just edit out these difficult passages!)
 - c. Well, add that to the list of questions to ask God when we get to heaven
 - d. But short of a full, satisfying answer, let's take today's story (and the Hebrew Scripture stories) at face value
 - i. we benefit from acknowledging that God is tenderhearted, relational, and is willing to engage us – even to the point of accommodating pesky, sassy, humans.
 - ii. I would even argue these stories don't mean God flip flops – I'd argue instead that this is consistent, a VERY GOD-LIKE thing to do in the course of loving us. (Jonah was mad because he KNEW God would ultimately forgive.)
- 4. The more we look at this story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, the closer we could feel to Jesus and could relate to her.
 - a. It's important to note that we've left out a key change here, not even mentioned in the story: the Syrophenician woman must have had a change of heart herself before approaching this powerful healer who belonged to an enemy people
 - b. The Syrophenician woman is now a role model, helping us be bold in how we can approach God seeking God's change of heart.
 - c. The story adds to the consistent view of Jesus as open and inclusive – at least once the story unfolds fully.
- 5. And I also wonder, if we apply this understanding, then how we can let ourselves have a change of heart when it is God who shows us a new, challenging path to follow.

- a. We may have a change of heart when we realize the parent of our child's best friend is one of those undocumented people demonized in the news.
 - b. We may have a change of heart when a friend with cancer is on the verge of bankruptcy because her job didn't provide health insurance
 - c. We may have a change of heart when someone working two jobs at minimum wage cannot afford a clean and safe place to rent.
6. Maybe God's heart was changed along the way of human history, or maybe it was set from the start. In the final analysis we know where God's heart is RIGHT now. We don't have to guess, or sass, or argue. Maybe God is the one being clever and bold to help us have a change of hearts to match God's heart.

Sources: *Wisdom Commentary. Mark*. By Warren Carter. Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press. 2019. p.187-200

Questions for reflection

1. Think of a story about discovering your role model was very much human. Did that help you get closer to them or did it distance you from them?
2. In Mark 7:24–30, it seems Jesus has a change of heart. Do you agree? How do you see Jesus in light of this story?
3. Where has God helped you have a change of heart?