

Here are some things I've THOUGHT about saying – but never actually said. For example, I go into a store that sells sunglasses – and only sun glasses. A young lady walks over and asks "What brings you in today?" I'd like to say: "I'm interested in buying a refrigerator." I wonder how she'd respond.

When people see a cat's litter box they always say, "Oh, have you got a cat?" Just once I want to say, "No, it's for company!" Or even better when they ask: "Do you have a bathroom?" I want to say – "No, we just go outside!"

Employment applications blanks always ask who is to be called in case of an emergency. I always wanted to write, "An AMBULANCE!" You know being young is beautiful – but being old is comfortable – and can be worth a lot of laughs if we play it right. Enough!

Another loaded gospel text. Let's dig in. In this gospel written for a mostly JEWISH audience, we find Jesus in Gentile territory and a Gentile woman seeks Him out. The woman is portrayed as assertive, coming forward to Jesus. She ignores the cultural taboos about Gentile women talking to Jewish males. She is also noisy, crying out as she is coming forward. We are told to "Behold" her – remember that bell-like word announcing something important is to be revealed or taught?

She may be both assertive and noisy, but she is also insightful. She knows who Jesus is. She calls Him, "LORD, Son of David," a comprehensive set of titles. Jesus is Lord, making Him one with God, and therefore meant for all people. But He is also Son of David, coming from the Jewish people with a particular heritage and distinctive traditions. Jesus is universal yet particular. She acknowledges this dual lineage.

The one who knows who Jesus is also knows what He has to give. She asks for mercy. This is what the combination of divine and human, of LORD and Son of David, is supposed to mediate. When the human is properly related to the divine, the divine – whose core is mercy – flows through the human. Since Jesus is the divine-human relationship in its perfect form, she is only asking for the full truth of Him to come forth.

The reason for this assertive, noisy, and bold begging for mercy is that her daughter is in agony with a demon. However, she is in such solidarity with her daughter that if Jesus has mercy on her, it will flow through her to her daughter. She does not want something for herself. What will be given to her will immediately be given to her daughter. She gives as she receives and she is a conduit for her child. Overall, this is Jesus' type of woman. BUT HE DID NOT ANSWER AT ALL.

WHY? This woman knows both His identity and His mission. She is only asking the Messiah to fulfill His calling and expel the demon who torments God's good creation. But Jesus refuses to recognize both her presence and request.

The disciples act as the storyteller's foil. They want Jesus to send her away because she is making a scene. It is the eternal dilemma: crying women and embarrassed men. But the problem is not with the woman. Jesus' lack of response has nothing to do with her pleading and crying. The problem lies in Jesus' mind. He has understood His identity and mission within the boundaries of Israel – and this is a Canaanite – pagan – woman from the regions of Tyre and Sidon. He belongs to Israel and the gathering of the strayed members of that house. This woman is outside that house, and so she is of no concern to the savior of the Jews.

But she KNEELS before Him, saying, “LORD, help me.” She is a reminder of other Gentiles in Matthew’s Gospel who knew who Christ was and did Him homage: think of the Magi in chapter 2 (Mt 2:1-12). But most importantly, she is not put off. Even Jesus’ declaration of His exclusive Jewish identity and mission did not keep her from coming forward. She does not flatter or bargain or argue. She is simply vulnerable: “LORD, help me.”

And in this plea, there is a very important omission. When she addressed Jesus the first time, she called Him, “LORD, son of David.” She does not wish to stress His Jewishness so she leaves out ‘son of David’—but she stresses His wider identity with all of humanity. She sees that He is coming down on His particularity and slighting His universality. The result is that she is outside of His house and her pleas go unheard.

Which then explains the reason for the give and take about dogs, children, and crumbs from the masters’ table. I never could get this until I read John Shea’s explanation. He suggests that this is a quick and remarkable bit of word play on the part of both of them. Its dense symbolism is the key to the unblocking of the Son of David and the emergence of the LORD.

To understand this, we need to know a bit about how differently Jews and Gentiles handled dogs. Dogs were not allowed in a Jewish house. In order to feed dogs with ‘the bread of the children,’ a Jew would have to take the bread off the table, walk to the door, open it, and throw it outside to the waiting dogs. But in GENTILE houses, the dogs were allowed inside. If they wanted to feed the dogs with ‘the bread of the children,’ Gentiles did not have to go outside the house. All they had to do was reach down with the leftovers. The dogs were avidly waiting.

Jesus told the woman that in order to feed her He had to take the bread that was inside the house and throw it outside the house. She was an outsider and what He has belongs to the insiders. She says, “Yes, LORD.” She agrees that the food belongs to the children or, in more theological language, “salvation is from the Jews” as John 4 tells us (Jn 4:23). But she continues her emphasis on Jesus’ universal outreach by calling Him “LORD,” the one meant for all. When Jesus lives within that identity, she is not outside the house. She is inside His house. She may not be a child at the table, but she is one who is eager for any food that Jesus has to offer. She is effectively saying: “I am already IN the house, LORD, just notice me.”

He then calls her ‘woman,’ which is not simply a description of her gender. And is certainly a far cry from dog. It means one who gives life. And the one she just gave life to is the one who calls her woman -- Jesus. The text reads “O woman – great is your faith.” (15:28) O suggests a shock of recognition on Jesus’ part, a sudden revelation. The pestering one becomes the bearer of a deeper truth. She gives Him more truth about His life. This is her great faith. Through persistence and cleverness she reminded Jesus of His true and full identity. He is a Jew. But, more importantly, He is LORD.

And He grants her request. “Let it be done for you as you wish.” Once the block is removed, mercy flows freely. The flow of mercy was momentarily dammed by too narrow an identification. Once identity expands, mercy flows, immediately and with deep effect. (all this adapted from John Shea, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN, p. 252-255)

I know that’s a lot – but it’s a deep, rich, and easily misunderstood text. And so quickly, point 2. Just as with Jesus, when we truly understand our identity – we are properly aligned with God. There is solidarity with every human being. Everyone is in the house of humanity. Everyone is created by God, all the same in God’s eyes. That includes everyone who hurts. Everyone who suffers. Everyone who cries out for understanding and compassion. Catholic priest John Dear writes: “If we deny anyone their humanity, if we do not recognize

everyone as a sister or a brother, if we oppose others who are different and seek to dominate everything according to our group or nation, we renounce God, reject Jesus, disregard the Gospel, and lose our vision. More fundamentally, we lose our humanity. We become inhuman.” (ONEING, Vol 6 #2, p. 7)

Most of us probably have never heard about a man named Louis Saunders. He was a Disciples of Christ minister who lived quietly and served as a pastor in Texas. But when he died in 1998, a long memorial to him appeared in THE NEW YORK TIMES because of a single act of love he performed.

Saunders was serving at a church in Fort Worth when he learned that Lee Harvey Oswald – the man who assassinated President Kennedy and who had, in turn, been killed by Jack Ruby – was going to be buried in his town. Saunders knew that Oswald’s mother was a Lutheran, so he worked the phones and arranged for 2 Lutheran ministers he knew to conduct the service. Everything was put in place, and, when the day arrived, Saunders stopped by the cemetery to observe.

When he got there, Saunders discovered that both ministers had backed out; they objected to the open-air ceremony, fearing they would be exposed to potential snipers. The small, forlorn, and impoverished Oswald family asked Saunders to fill in, so he did. He’d left his Bible in his car, but he knew some of it by heart; so from memory he recited the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm and a passage from the Gospel of John. And he said this: “Mrs. Oswald tells me that her son, Lee Harvey, was a good boy and that she loved him. And today, Lord, we commit his spirit to your divine care.” It’s probably fair to say that on that date in the United States there was no more hated person than Lee Harvey Oswald. No one had anything to say about him that allowed any room for grace or redemption. No one, that is, except his mother – and Rev. Saunders. And of course, God. Christ cared enough to come into our world. Christ cared for the undeserving. (DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2008, p. 24-25)

And finally, a story that shows that MERCY flows when we are properly aligned with God. Thomas Ann Hines, a divorced mother of an only child, learned mercy the hard way. When her son, a freshman at college, lay murdered by a 17-year-old drifter who first solicited a ride from him and, then, when he got in the car, turned a gun on her son, Thomas Ann descended into a pit of anger and vengeance. The murder was a random, groundless, indefensible act. And her son was not the only person who died that night – Thomas Ann did – alone, distraught, full of the kind of pain and hate that paralyzes the heart and stops life in its tracks.

Her son, a good boy, a successful student, the hope of her life, was gone. She herself was completely alone now, without a future, without a hope, without any reason, it seemed, to live.

But 13 years later, Thomas Ann Hines visited her son’s killer in prison, intent only on getting information about the night of the killing. But when, in the course of the conversation the young man put his face down on the small table at which they sat and began to sob, she touched the man. And she got to know him.

The story shocked the country. “How could she do such a thing?” people asked. Or, more to the point, perhaps, they asked themselves the question, “Could I ever do such a thing? Could I possibly show mercy to someone who had done something so senseless, so heinous, so destructive to me?”

Thomas Ann’s answer to the question was a simple one: “If my son was sitting in this room,” she said, “I’d want someone to reach out a hand and lift him up.”

Mercy is what God does for us. Mercy discounts the economics of fair. Mercy gives a human being who does not ‘deserve’ love, love. And why? Because, the scriptures tell us, “God was first merciful to us.”

God knows that we are all made of the same thing: clay, the dust of the earth, the frail, shapeless thing from which we come and to which we will all return someday. We are all capable of the same things. As my spiritual director used to say: “It’s not ‘there but for the grace of God go I,’ but ‘there go I.’” Because we are all capable of the same sins. Most of us have simply never had the opportunity or the anger or the sense of desolation it takes to do it. While we’re being grateful for that, it behooves us to be merciful to those who have committed even terrible things. (adapted from Joan Chittister, in GOD’S TENDER MERCY, p. 8-13)

I return to Shea’s quote: “When the human is properly aligned with the divine, the divine whose core is mercy – flows through the human.” So may it be for you and for me. For the sake of our world. For the sake of our souls. AMEN.

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