

A sermon preached by Jessica Rathbun-Cook
1 Kings 17:8-24; Psalm 126; Mark 7:24-30
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1 Kings 17:8-24

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, 'Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.' As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.' But she said, 'As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.' Elijah said to her, 'Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.' She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, 'What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!' But he said to her, 'Give me your son.' He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?' Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.' The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, 'See, your son is alive.' So the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.'

Psalm 126

A Song of Ascents.

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.*

*Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;*

*then it was said among the nations,
'The Lord has done great things for them.'*

*The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*

*Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

*May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

Mark 7:24-30

From there he 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 Syrophenician 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.

In 2008, philosopher and theologian Cornell West wrote that we in the United States are in one of the “most truly prophetic moments in the history of America”.... Amidst an ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor, wars, media and political propaganda campaigns targeted against the most vulnerable, we have seen the breakdown of the systems which are supposed to support the most vulnerable among us. West sees a sense of the “tragicomic” as a means of survival against the reality of defeat, disillusionment, and discouragement in the world. The tragicomic allows us to maintain a “sense of possibility. Some sense of hope. Some sense of agency. Some sense of resistance.” Yet, “hope is no guarantee,” West says. “Real hope is grounded in a . . . messy struggle and it can be betrayed by naïve projections of a better future that ignore the necessity of doing the real work. So what we are talking about is hope on a tightrope.”¹

This notion of “hope on a tightrope” is a theme which could be applied to the community for whom the Gospel of Mark was written. Mark was written in a time and for a people in the midst of conflict and uncertainty, people who faced maldistribution of economic resources, wars, social and religious institutions which, rather than protecting the most vulnerable in society, exposed them to greater danger.

Looking around today, particularly after weeks like this week, it would seem that the tightrope of which West speaks is now little more than a thread. There are times it feels as though those of us who long and work for a better world are nothing more than a huddled mass, naively dangling over an abyss, waiting for that last thread of hope to break.

I will not presume to know how to make sense of tragedies like the shooting that happened last weekend anymore than I can make sense of the path of the storm that raged

¹ Cornell West, *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom*, New York: Smiley Books, 2008, 2-4.

through Richmond on Thursday night. I will not insult you with empty platitudes about the good that may come from this. The wounds in this country are far too deep to be healed by any sort of collective kumbaya moment, and to be honest, I think we are all too tired for any sort of candy-coated rhetoric.

Earlier this week, I posted something on Facebook that struck a chord with Alfred Walker; enough so that he wrote a piece about it on the church's blog.

I wrote that while I still believe in the power of faith communities to transform lives and be places of healing and transformation for individuals and systemic change, I have never been able to breathe as deeply, to know that I was safe to fully be myself in a church as I have been in a gay bar. There is a kind of armor that LGBTQ people put on when we venture out into the world – a certain preparedness to explain how we know who we are, or decide whether or not to correct someone when they use the wrong gender for us, or argue when make assumptions about the kind of people we date, or whether it's worth the risk of losing friends or a job or, for some, our lives, if we share who we are with those around us.

For many LGBTQ people, nightclubs or bars have been the places where we have been able to take off that armor. Many of us have had to survive and learned to thrive without the boundaries of traditionally-defined church walls. Our sanctuaries bear no vaulted ceilings or cushioned pews. For many LGBTQ people, family is not defined by blood, but by the sweat that has dripped to the dance floors of bars and clubs whose darkness offered the safety and solace not found in more traditional spaces. The club is the place where people can take off the proverbial corset they so often wear to keep other people comfortable. Or, if they so choose, where they can put on the corset they have for too long been shamed out of wearing.

For LGBTQ communities of color, suffering at the intersections of a racist, sexist, and homophobic society, this need for sanctuary and the violation of that sanctuary at Orlando is felt even more acutely.

In the first part of his poem “All the Dead Boys Look like Me,” written for the victims of the Orlando shooting, poet Christopher Soto experiences many of the feelings shared by LGBTQ people of color.

Last time, I saw myself die is when police killed Jessie Hernandez

A 17 year old brown queer, who was sleeping in their car

Yesterday, I saw myself die again. Fifty times I died in Orlando. And

I remember reading, Dr. José Esteban Muñoz before he passed

I was studying at NYU, where he was teaching, where he wrote shit

That made me feel like a queer brown survival was possible. But he didn't

Survive and now, on the dancefloor, in the restroom, on the news, in my chest

There are another fifty bodies, that look like mine, and are

Dead. And I have been marching for Black Lives and talking about the police brutality

Against Native communities too, for years now, but this morning

I feel it, I really feel it again. How can we imagine ourselves // We being black native

Today, Brown people // How can we imagine ourselves
When All the Dead Boys Look Like Us? Once, I asked my nephew where he wanted
To go to College. What career he would like, as if
The whole world was his for the choosing. Once, he answered me without fearing
Tombstones or cages or the hands from a father.²

How do we move forward in times like these, when any prophetic vision one may tout risks trivializing the pain and suffering so many are going through? It's too close and too soon to start talking about any silver lining that may be found in the bodies of so many lost.

And yet, without at least a sliver of something that might pull us forward, we risk letting ourselves fall into a sort of nihilistic pit that screams at us to stock our armories even fuller, to trust less, to suspect more.

How, if we are to survive as a people amidst such devastation and in the face of so many systemic evils, how do we see a way forward, when we can barely find the strength to get out of bed in the morning, when our laughter feels like a dream, and our tears pour to the ground like rain? When the body count keeps stacking up? I'm honestly not sure. But I *think* at least part of the answer holds a combination of memory and sass. I *know* we cannot do it alone.

The Gospel of Mark was written for a community in the midst of tremendous suffering and conflict. Held under the thumbs of people with more power and authority, both socially and religiously, the message of Jesus' story, that the last would be first, was one of liberation for Mark's audience. Mark saw Israel as a land of divisive boundaries: boundaries between the rich and poor, between the clean and unclean, between the leaders and those for whom they were responsible, between the broken and means to achieve wholeness, between Jew and Gentile. In Mark, Jesus' life and ministry were about shattering those boundaries.

I recently heard the woman from today's gospel text referred to as "the woman who sassed Jesus." The exchange between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman often gives people pause, for some because of the way Jesus dismisses her pleas and calls her a dog. For others, because of her refusal to back down. It is a time when we see a side of Jesus that is unfamiliar, even troubling.

Perhaps this is not the best place for me to confess this, but I've never really had a difficult time with Jesus' behavior in this text. As anyone in a helping profession can attest, there are times when we just need a break. Jesus had just fed five thousand people, healed many, and had a fairly testy exchange with the Pharisees. It's clear from the text that Jesus doesn't want people to know he's there. He's way out of his territory, likely trying to find a bit of solace. He's tired, and he's weary of one more pair of hands coming to him empty, especially from a voice so sassy. I can almost hear him saying it: "I just can't. Not today. I have nothing left to give right now, and I need some rest."

I have spent a great deal of time with this text over the last few years and I confess that I still wrestle with what it is that causes the shift in Jesus. What word does the woman speak that

² <http://lithub.com/all-the-dead-boys-look-like-me/>

changes his mind? I'm inclined to believe there is something in the exchange that reminds Jesus of who he is. Even though the woman would not have known Hebrew scriptures, and never read the story of Elijah and the widow of Zerahath, Jesus and his audience certainly knew it. I like the idea that in the exchange with this woman, Jesus would have been jolted a bit, reminded of the story of the widow and Elijah, of the woman who was at the end of her tether and out of resources, so hopeless that she was ready to surrender her life and the life of her son.

I like to think Jesus would have remembered that Elijah, too, was traveling beyond the boundaries of his familiar territory, and that he was fed by the woman – that the crumbs of meal sustained not only the woman and her son, but also the prophet. I'd like to think her comment reminded Jesus and his audience that, though we as faith communities might like to draw lines around the boundaries of the communities we serve, that the God we profess to follow does not define such boundaries.

Sometimes faith communities need that – to be reminded that we are not the ones who define what is sacred or who is worthy. Often those reminders come from the ones we've deemed to be less holy than ourselves, or beyond the bounds of our ministry.

Even – I would say sometimes especially - those we perceive as more holy than ourselves need a little sass. Perhaps the author of Mark's gospel was illustrating that this can be a tremendously difficult thing - so difficult that even the Son of God needed a little reminder. Or, maybe the author of Mark is naming for the audience that the work of being holy is hard - so hard that even the holiest among us struggle.

Regardless of the intent of the author, or the inner thoughts of Jesus, the exchange between the Syrophoenician woman and Jesus marks a turning point in the Gospel. No longer is his ministry held within Jewish territory. When Jesus leaves the woman, he goes back through Gentile land, heals a man, and then feeds four thousand Gentiles. Any ideas about a ministry that was brought only for the Jews are gone – the transformative love of God that tore open the heavens in the first chapter of Mark has now torn apart the boundaries that had for so long defined and protected the Jewish community, opening up with it a new idea of the holy.

In today's psalm, we find a community in the midst of a catastrophe, and it is through the act of remembering a past restoration that they find their hope. It is on the fine line between expectation and despair that they are emboldened to ask God to renew in them the shouts of joy they have known before, to turn their weeping to harvest. For the community singing this psalm, the act of remembering is what gives them the strength to move forward. At times when we feel lost, or cannot see a way ahead, it is necessary to look into our collective memories to see how to move forward.

For many in the LGBTQ community, particularly those of a certain age, when we talk about a collective memory, it is difficult to not talk about the AIDS crisis. In the 1980s, as AIDS was tearing town thousands upon thousands of people, and the government, seeing it as largely a “gay disease,” continued to ignore its effects, many people in need of services and community, were turned away from both. People lost their families, their faith communities, their homes and, eventually, their lives. Church of the Holy Comforter, an Episcopal Church here in Richmond, was intentional about outreach to the community so impacted by the disease. During the passing of the peace, rather than just reaching out and shaking hands or hugging those around them, they would kiss one another on the mouth.

Now, I'm a big hugger on the whole, and would identify myself as one who is fairly comfortable with embracing folks I may not know well. But, I have to admit that the idea of kissing folks on the mouth pushes me a little bit outside my comfort zone. Maybe a lot outside.

But can you imagine what that would have been like for those suffering with AIDS, or for those who were part of the community that had been stigmatized to such an extent that even doctors and nurses refused to care for them? To go to a church where you were not only seen but where you were embraced? Kissed on the mouth? What would that have been like?

Perhaps the answer is not to build more walls or buy more guns, but to let ourselves be vulnerable with one another – to open up, speak honestly, even when it scares us, to risk being seen and seeing one another.

In his blog piece this week, Alfred talked about his own transformation in understanding the holy. "Holy," he said, "is where we find it, where we feel it, where we are affirmed, where we are most real . . . Holy, I'm pretty sure, is feeling God's pleasure in our own selves...I love my church," Alfred continues, "and I love being there. I'm grateful, this week, for the understanding that people can love church *anywhere* – a chapel, park, bar. . . when they experience that which is Holy through themselves and those nearby."

Is it really such a radical idea for us who profess faith in a God who can bring life out of death, multiply loaves, who claim that even the rocks can cry out in order to offer praise, to see the holiness of God manifest beyond the boundaries the places we've deemed holy?

I believe that God is a God of abundance, a God who calls us and lead us beyond the margins of our comfort. I believe that we are called to bear one another's burdens and to hold one another, even if we do not fully understand one another. I also believe the act of listening is one of the most holy things we can do, especially when we are sassed. It is in that difficult space where we are born into something more, where fear turns to trust, where hope turns to action.

So maybe it's not that we have to look back, but that we have to dig a little deeper into the collective memories buried in what I often call our ooey gooey centers, beneath the hard candy shells we have been socialized to wear. In doing so, might we learn from both our mistakes and our successes. May hold one another - our anger, even when we don't understand, our sorrow even when can't fully relate, our joy, even when we may despair. May we hold one another accountable to living into the people we are called to be, while recognizing that the vision we have, however broad, is always incomplete. May we make room to be surprised and to be transformed.