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St. James' Church
9/6/15

Proper 18/B
Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

After months of prayer, guidance from the Spirit, and planning - it is great to finally be here and worshipping with all of you today!

It's no small task to sit down and write the first sermon for a new parish, let me tell you. Lots of questions ran through my head. Should I try to be funny, or a serious academic? Should I tackle one of the many current events we are facing and what our faith might have to say about it? Should I bring props? (that's not even a real question, bring props whenever you can.)

But then I sat down like I always do when preparing to write a sermon, to pray and read the scriptures, and I said to myself, duh, preach the Gospel – that's why we're here – and the rest of it will fall into place.

So. Props. Don't expect this every Sunday, but today I'd like to share my Jesus Action Figure.

As far as action figures go, he's pretty chill. He raises his arms in prayer and blessing, and per the package, he has a realistic gliding motion. I imagine that's kind of how he looked when he walked on water.

You may be wondering where in the world I'm going with this, and I promise it's not just a first sermon gimmick.

You see, one of the central tenants of the Christian faith is the incarnation. – we celebrate it every year with Christmas! It is the belief that God chose to be not only born *of* a human, but *became* human, to be with us. That's how much God loved and loves us.

It's true that God is bigger than any of our imaginations and won't be stuffed into any of our neat little boxes, and yet God made the decision to live the limited life of a human.

We affirm this every week when we say the Nicene Creed, asserting that in Jesus God was both fully human and fully divine.

It is a mystery as to **how** exactly this all worked out in the wash, and I'm not going to go into a detailed theological exploration today. But I want to bring up the incarnation because we pay it great lip service, but I'm not sure we always really believe in it.

Too often our faith defaults to Action Figure Jesus – that is the fully divine side, with realistic gliding motion.

And why not, it **is** God. And we get stories like those in Mark's Gospel today, with the casting out of a demon from afar and the healing of a deaf and mute man.

You have to suspend human reality to believe those stories. Or take them as symbolic. Or just write them off, that's what Thomas Jefferson did after all.

But, what if we weave *our* understanding of what it means to be *human* **with** the *divine* power Jesus wielded?

We would find hypocrisy, sin, reconciliation, healing, compassion, and mercy, – in short, we would find today's Gospel stories.

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Today's verses from Mark come directly after another confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities. In last week's Gospel we witnessed that back and forth where he warned of hypocrisy, and proclaimed that what defiles in this world are evil intentions that come from the human heart, and then he gave a veritable laundry list – do these sound familiar?

Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

We always assume he was talking to us. We convict ourselves when we hear such words.

But what if the author of this Gospel put that story back to back with today's stories on purpose? What if instead of reading them as separate, unconnected blurbs we see the first setting up the second? And what if the warnings about hypocrisy highlight not the shortcomings of Jesus' followers, but of Jesus himself?¹

¹ Loye Bradley Ashton, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*.

Whoa. Is that allowed? Is this heresy?

Whoa indeed. And yes it's allowed, if we truly believe in the incarnation. And nope, not heresy (though I'm happy to share my heretical thoughts with you at another time).

A woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Jesus 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."

This is not the compassionate and caring healer Jesus we have come to know and love.

What we see in Jesus' interaction with the Syrophenician woman is what one scholar has called a moment where Jesus is caught his proverbial compassion down.²

Put another way, we get to witness a kind of "conversion" moment for Jesus, in which he realized (maybe in a very human moment of physical and mental exhaustion – the story set up seems to indicate he was trying to lie low after the

² Amy C. Howe, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*.

recent intensity of the crowds) how he had lost sight of the point of his mission, and needed to be reconnected with it by someone assumed to be outside of it.³

Props to this prophetic woman who spoke truth to power and was the only person in the entire Gospel of Mark to best Jesus in an argument.⁴

In the verses just prior Jesus had reminded his followers that social conventions should not stand in the way of creating community and helping those in need. In these verses this woman reminds Jesus himself of that, and with that Jesus declares to her, “*For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.*”

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Contrary to the image of God as immutable, what we have in this story is a human Jesus wrestling with the very real limits of humanity – with hypocrisy, sin, reconciliation – and yet responding with healing, compassion, and mercy,

And what points us toward Jesus’ divinity here is that changing his mind and re-centering himself did not lead to a diminishment of his power. Being human isn’t his full story, and so instead we see an expansion of his power and the revealing that God is not unchanging or unresponsive, but indeed compassionate and merciful (that’s where we learned it from after all).

The story of the man who is deaf and mute that immediately follows Jesus being straightened out and opened up by the Syrophenician woman serves as an example of how being opened up empowers one to open up others.⁵

³ Loye Bradley Ashton, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*.

⁴ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Women’s Bible Commentary*.

⁵ Loye Bradley Ashton, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*.

So it was that when a crowd brought to Jesus the man and asked him to lay hands on him, he took him aside and healed him.

This healing stands out because of the very tactile nature of it. As opposed to the healing of the woman's daughter with a word and from afar, here Jesus is very hands on.

(Jesus) put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue released, and he spoke plainly.

Here we see a cloth fully woven. In the coming chapters Jesus will continue to heal and work miracles among the crowds, spar with the authorities, and invite people to come to know him more fully.

But with the close of chapter 7, I think we see a fullness of the humanness and divineness of Jesus.

We get to keep Action Figure Jesus, but we also have to claim a softer Jesus.

Like say this knit finger puppet Jesus.

It is the classic both/and, as opposed to the either/or.

And our faith is richer for it.

Is there not comfort in the thought that Jesus faced his own hypocrisy and struggled to find his own center in God, knowing suffering not only at the hands of the powers that be, but also as the challenge of the human condition itself?

Is there not comfort in the realization that God never causes suffering, but experienced it through the incarnation, and so with compassion and mercy abides with us in our own suffering?

Is there not comfort in the promise of healing – from afar through the unrelenting love of God, and up close through the power of community?

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My prayer is that we our faith embraces the fullness of Jesus, embodying the words of today's Collect, that we, like Jesus, trust in God with our whole hearts, always resisting pride that confides in its own strength, while boasting of God's mercy and compassion.

~ AMEN ~