

## Sermon 9 8&9 18

Imagine the scene... Imagine Jesus... He's sitting there, resting... It apparently took energy or power out of him to perform the miracles he did. (At one point in the gospels, when someone touched his robe for healing, it is written that he could feel the power go out of him.)

Wholly human and wholly divine. 100% human *and* 100% divine. Already he's impossible to understand. Already, his very existence defies our natural laws. (I think he's allowed to do that, don't you?!)

Jesus was just sitting there. And a woman who had heard of him came up to him, (like so many others, they came one after another), and she asked him to heal her daughter. Her daughter had a demon, an unclean spirit within her. But this mother and her daughter were Syro-Phoenecian, they were Gentiles. This woman knew that her people were hated by the Jews. She knew Jesus might even refuse to speak to her. But she was desperate. This was her child's life she was begging for! An innocent child – who knew nothing of Romans or Jews or Gentiles or hatred between races.

The people of Israel had been promised a messiah. They believed this messiah would save them. He would come with power and might and would deliver them from whoever was overrunning them at the moment. He would bring about a time of prosperity such as they had known with Kings David and Solomon. But, as they understood it, he was just *their* Messiah, the messiah for Israel. He wasn't supposed to be for any other tribe or people – just them. The eventual, promised appearance of the Messiah was and is part of the very bedrock of the Jewish faith.

So as far as this woman, this mother knew, if Jesus was the Messiah, he wasn't *her or her child's* Messiah, but maybe, just maybe, he would have pity on her.

And then Jesus said the most horrible thing I think he could say, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In other words, I am here for the children of Israel, not you or your daughter. You are like dogs under my table.

What?!?!? Our loving Jesus? The one who asked the little children to come to him? The Messiah, the one of salvation and peace? There are Bible interpreters who twist this moment into a Jesus-teaching-the-mother moment. I don't think so. That still would be too cruel.

Apparently that 100% human and 100% divine formula can come with a few pitfalls. Yes. Jesus is always portrayed for us as perfect. But let's think about perfection for a moment. Is perfection static? Can perfection learn? Can perfection grow?

Did this wonderful, desperate mother begin to rail and scream? Did she tear her hair out? No. In her great and trembling disappointment she answered Jesus, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

And our world, the world of "Yes, Jesus loves me" opened up. Bloomed like a flower. And grows.

Yes. Jesus was and is perfect. But perfection is not static. Perfection can change and grow and become even more perfect.

Jesus was not like a perfect work of art, immovable, unchangeable. Jesus was living and breathing. And he still is! Maybe not alive and breathing as you and I understand that in our limited human way, but he is a living God who loves and cares for us.

Now this may scare some people, and that's OK. We don't want and need a Jesus who is like a statue, like a primitive idol. We want a Jesus who we can talk with, who walks beside us in our daily lives.

I believe we want a Jesus who can change his mind. Benjamin Franklin once said, "When you're finished changing, you're finished."

We have other times in the Bible where God changed his mind. How does this happen with the one who is all-knowing, all-powerful, *unchanging* etc.? How does this happen with the one we rely on NOT to change?

The first example of God changing his mind that occurs to me is when God threatened to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham entered into this dialogue with God. And excuse me, but I think their conversation is kind of funny! Just listen: "Abraham asked God, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' And God said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Abraham answered, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?' And God said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' Again Abraham spoke to him, 'Suppose forty are found there.' God answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.' Then Abraham said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' God answered, 'I will not do it if I find thirty there.' Abraham said, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' God answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then Abraham said, 'Oh do not

let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' God answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.' And the Lord went his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham." He hightailed it out of there is what he did!

Unfortunately, they couldn't find anyone who was righteous except Lot and his household and even that didn't turn out well for Lot's wife. But God *was willing* to change his mind.

God also got very angry with the people of Israel for worshipping the golden calf. God asked Moses to leave so that the wrath of God could burn hot and come down and consume them and Moses was promised that God would start over and make a great nation out of *him!* But Moses begged God to change his mind and God did. This is an excellent example of God showing mercy and changing his mind. As James tells us, "mercy triumphs over judgment."

Jonah, the reluctant prophet, was sent by God to warn the people of Ninevah of their coming destruction for their evil ways. Eventually, after his adventure with, or rather *in* the whale, Jonah *did* warn them. And much to his chagrin they actually paid attention! They listened and repented and God changed his mind. Ninevah was spared and Jonah, unfortunately, was disgusted. He became the most reluctantly successful prophet in the Bible!

How does this work? Changeable and unchanging. Well, I couldn't resist. I went online and typed in "Can God change his mind?" (Please forgive the use of "he." I think it's just as likely that God is a she OR that maybe we should learn to stop thinking of God as a he or a she. But that's another sermon.) Anyway, I typed that question in and you would not believe the variety of answers! *Everyone's* a theologian! And maybe everyone should be. It was kind of fun.

Some of the theologians simply denied that God changed his mind at all! They somehow worked their way around it. Most of their answers were parsing out the translations of Hebrew and Greek in the stories and that's all very interesting for some of us, (not for me...). But mostly I felt they were avoiding the question.

The best answer I found was on a very thoughtful insurance salesman's blog. He said, "So I think I am concluding that God's character never changes, but he can alter his responses to us based on our change of heart, prayer, and actions."

Hmmmm... Pretty good theologian for a salesman.

But this led me to other questions. Was this story of Jesus being so impressed by the faith

of this gentile woman that he changed his mind and healed her daughter from what was probably a terrible mental illness – was this one of the stories that tell us about another moment in the history of the early church when we learn how the Way of Jesus Christ opened up and became the Christian church for everyone, not just for the people of Israel? That’s certainly possible.

But I also have to ask the more basic question I asked at the beginning of this sermon. “Is perfection really supposed to be static, unchanging?” Is the unflexible, unchanging really to be admired? I don’t think so. Should we think of God as utterly unchanging? I don’t think that portrays God as a figure of security, someone we can count on. I think that turns God into stone, too much like a dead, graven image. I don’t believe that the foremost image of our faith is the cross. It’s the empty open tomb, the hope of the resurrection, filled with possibilities, the living Jesus Christ. Our faith is meant to be alive too. We respond to God and God responds to us. Our relationship with God is always in motion, but God’s love and character and promises are unchanging. There is no point in the Bible where God is inconsistent. And neither is Jesus.

And if God is alive, living and loving us, then we too need to be alive, living our faith. As James tells us, faith that is living is filled with good works for others. But, “Faith without works is dead.”

It’s a tall order, isn’t it? This business of being a Christian. But if we start with faith in God’s living love for us, trusting that God’s love doesn’t change, then we too can live in faith. We can take God’s love for us out into the world and offer it to others. We can do this. We have done this. And it’s always done “with God’s help.”