

BREAKING THE CYCLE
Sermon for Pentecost 14B, Proper 18: Mk 7:24-37
LPC, 9/6/09

I have just finished reading a book called *The Space Between Us* by Indian-American author Thrity Umrigar. The story takes place in Bombay and describes two families, one middle class and one from the slums. Though the caste system has been outlawed in India, the story makes clear that there is a lot of space between people of different classes. The lines are clearly drawn and rigidly observed. People on one side of the line, when push comes to shove, find it easy enough to dehumanize people on the other side, with no particular evil intention at all. The cycle of overclass and underclass continues unabated, despite the supposed demise of caste. Lines are not crossed.

Some lines that used to be clearly drawn and rigidly observed in this country are fading, thank heavens: lines of race and gender particularly. Certain lines remain, and some lines actually seem to be intensifying.

For example the polarization of political debate in this country seems to be at an all-time high in my lifetime. Some social commentators attribute this polarization at least partially to cable television. There is no unifying voice, like Walter Cronkite's, to which everybody tunes in. People listen to the version of the news they like best. This is only natural. But when people only listen to others who think as they do, it becomes increasingly easy to discount, and even dehumanize, anyone who disagrees.

In this atmosphere, lines between people harden and grow inflexible. To my ear, the hardening of those lines has reduced the debate of a legitimate issue like health care to an unproductive hurling of epithets. One side acts nasty, and the other responds in kind. Who started it? Who knows? But the cycle is firmly in place, and it seems impossible to break.

But surely it is human nature to draw lines? Everybody seems to do it. Even Jesus seems to do it in today's excerpt from the Gospel of Mark.

This is a disturbing and problematic episode. Jesus has left Galilee and traveled far afield, to the very coast of the Mediterranean. The city of Tyre is a seaport, and seaports are famously multi-cultural areas. Any Jew traveling there might expect to have contact with non-Jews. From the Bible it's clear that Jews drew clear lines between themselves and non-Jews. And, as we've seen, as lines are drawn and enforced, it becomes increasingly easy to discount and dehumanize people on the other side.

A person from the other side, a gentile, a Syrophonecian, a *woman*, approaches Jesus based on his reputation for healing, and asks him to heal her daughter. So far this doesn't look much different from all the other healing stories. What is shocking is Jesus' response: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." When he speaks of "children," he is clearly referring to his own

people, the Jews. He is upholding the line. As for the woman, she is identified with the dogs. Jesus' language dehumanizes the woman.

The woman may be a dog, but she has the quick wit of a debater or lawyer. She concedes Jesus' point but counters that *house* dogs (this distinction comes from Jesus' own language) are allowed the remnants of the family's meal. Jesus appears to concede this, and heals the daughter by remote.

Despite the happy ending, Jesus' first words to the woman stick in the craw. The words seem to our ears harsh and cruel. However, it must be said that few people in Jesus' own day, from Jesus' own group, would have found his words unusual or objectionable. It's only because we, as a culture, have already accepted the end of this story, and the other Jesus' stories, that we deplore Jesus' initial, depersonalizing words. Throughout his ministry, we know, Jesus crosses lines, Jesus targets the downtrodden in his ministry, Jesus preaches love and forgiveness and non-judgment. We know the whole story, so why this uncharacteristic glitch?

Commentators have taken two main routes to explain the heartlessness of Jesus' initial words to the Syrophonecian woman. According to the first theory, Jesus, being God, knew what he was going to do, but spoke this way to draw attention to his words and teach his disciples a lesson. The second theory says that Jesus, being human, actually evolved in his thinking during the course of his exchange with this woman.

I tend toward the latter theory. Jesus here gives us an example of someone who steps over a line, interrupting the cycle of prejudice and competition between two distinct groups. Significantly in this story, we see him in the process of stepping over the line, in the process of breaking the cycle. He begins the story upholding the standard of favoring the group to which he himself belongs, and ends the story reaching out to the group to which he doesn't.

To my ear, Jesus does not start out with the intent of challenging the status quo. He doesn't break the cycle coming out of heaven as God. Although Jesus *is* fully God, He breaks the cycle as a human, as a sign to all us humans who consider ourselves locked into preexisting cycles of prejudice and competition. Someone has to break the cycle. Jesus breaks it. Jesus oversteps the line.

Jesus overstepping the line has ethical and theological implications. The ethical implication is that Jesus, being human, broke an intractable cycle of prejudice and competition. We are called to go and do likewise. We can't claim that it can't be done. It has been done.

The theological implication is that Jesus has not only broken the cycles that separate people from one another. Jesus has also broken the cycle of sin and guilt and death. Not even this cycle, the most unavoidable in human existence, can withstand the power of Jesus. For Jesus, we are never on the wrong side of the line.