

Why So Messy?

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Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Hamden, CT

[Isaiah 35:4-7](#)

[Psalm 146](#)

[James 2:1-10, 14-17](#)

[Mark 7:24-37](#)

I've been asking myself: "Why are these encounters that Jesus has in the Gospel of Mark so messy?" One interaction with a woman very different from him, and another very "hands-on" healing with a man unable to see or speak.

As our Psalmist declares, God is the source of life and health, yes. Jesus heals us of all the forces that defy God—the demons, so-to-speak, sure. Jesus allows us to see God in the world, Jesus frees our tongue to sing God's praise, ok. But why with spit?

And why does Jesus exchange words with this woman so harshly? Why are these interactions so messy and uncomfortable? When there is something puzzling in the Gospels, it's not our job to ignore it, but to look closer and listen to what God is saying to us.

I always used to feel so bad for this Syrophenician woman that Jesus meets. She seems so pathetic, and she's so incredibly different from Jesus. This lady is four-times removed from Jesus. She's a woman, she's not Jewish, she was ethnically Greek, and she is, actually, quite wealthy too.

Some experts suggest that this Syrophenician woman, and the lifestyle that she enjoyed as a Greek person in this part of the world, came at the expense of the mostly poor and heavily taxed Judeans like Jesus and his fisherman friends, and those who followed him. Jesus and his people were under the heel of one occupying force or another for generations: whether the Babylonians, Persians, Alexander the Great and his Greek successors, and then the Romans, of course, with the governor Pontius Pilate. Because of all these conquerors and settlers, that's why there would even be a Greek-speaking woman in the land of Tyre so close to Galilee.

It's a difficult encounter for everyone, to say the least. She finds Jesus, having heard about his power over sickness and death. She must have been so humiliated to kneel and beg, but, clearly, she's desperate and she believes that Jesus has what she needs. And Jesus responds to her plea with an almost cruel response. Jesus, we heard, takes her down another notch. He tells her he won't help her, until all the children, the poor people of Israel, that is, are fed—and even calls her a dog. And then she pushes back, arguing her case, and Jesus concedes. Such a messy exchange, so many boundaries crossed, it's what I would call a "very human" interaction.

When we say something is “very human” we mean it’s... sort of gritty, right?

But there’s more to it, when we say “human,” though it might appear flawed, we also mean there’s also a kind of tenderness to it, a warmth, despite it all—human. I wonder if that’s the connection with these “messy” encounters. They’re not messy, only, but their human. God, we confess and believe, chose to become fully human in Jesus.

The point, of course, is this: that this woman’s daughter isn’t healed because she’s rich, and Jesus doesn’t withhold life and wholeness because she’s ethnically different. Her daughter is healed because God loves all people. But it takes some time to tease all this out. God loves not just the “clean and perfect” people or the “inside” people, but God loves all people, all cultures, from the very bottom, up—from our messiness, up.

Sort of how James writes in his letter that God loves without the kinds of distinctions we make. And to show us that, James writes that God chooses the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom—in the face of all social ideas of who deserves what. When God meets people like this, in our lives and in the Bible, it’s messy.

But God meets you where you are, as a human. What we experience as a kind of upside down, or uncomfortable, or slow encounter—Christ shows is exactly the very identity of God. Jesus’ crucifixion is by every outward appearance a messy, uncomfortable and slow human death, but we believe there perfectly God opened mercy and life for all the world.

I’ll admit, it’s really kind of a head-scratcher...

So, my father-in-law recently fixed two sinks in his home. And his choice in plumbing store also had me thinking about all this messiness and being human, and who God is in the person of Christ.

Rather than going to a bewildering and impersonal big-box store, he is dedicated to this hole-in-the-wall shop for plumping parts. He said he was fed up with impossible experiences at Home Depot or wherever. This place of his is messy and it’s slow, just like Jesus’ encounters today in Mark, but my father-in-law said, “The place is just a little more... ‘human.’”

Here, you call on the phone first, or you go in-person. Sometimes it’s open, sometimes not. You order the parts you need and wait for them to come in. When you pick them up, you watch as the ancient and cranky guy finds them in his library of boxes and nooks and corners, while the shop cat comes over and walks between your legs. But, of course, when he returns to the counter, they are exactly what you need.

When my father-in-law came in with a leaky goose-neck faucet, and no clue what was wrong, rather than selling him a new fixture or an expensive part, the curmudgeonly old guy said, “Nah, nah, you dope.” He disappears into a mountain of crusty pipes and gadgets, returns, and

drops the exactly correct rubber ring into a baggy, says with a grunt, "This'll fix it." My father-in-law took out his wallet, and the man, with a limp wave of his hand, refuses payment.

The entrance to this plumber's store is in a back alley, down some crooked stairs, covered in dust and parts and junk. The guy is sort of a jerk, at least at first. But you get what you need, your sink is fixed—your washer is free of charge. Just as Jesus heals in Mark's Gospel, free of charge.

And the next time, when you come back, there is the same guy, the same junk, the same cat, and he knows you.

Right now, people do seem to be in hurry to stop being human. I get it, though. Being human means disagreement at the dinner table. Being human means losing people to cancer; or being vulnerable to floods and hurricanes and climate change.

There's plenty of conveniences around that make it easy to forget what it even means to be human, to meet each other where we are as Jesus so clearly does in Mark today. Even before all the sad and necessary separation caused by COVID, you could get what you want without leaving your house, without interacting with another person, without having to touch or negotiate the world of people.

You know: Celebrities never age because of clever plastic surgeries and procedures, and pictures on social media are filtered to be perfect. Interactions and arguments on Facebook have no real consequences. Robots and AI do our labor. Algorithms choose our products for us. All this seems to say "human" is bad.

But again, you've always got to remember to ask yourself: Why did God choose to become flesh, to be emptied of everything and become human? Why does all this messiness in Mark's Gospel end in life and vision, joy and astonishment? In a funny way, in what I've been calling "being human," Jesus shows us what is actually a very supernatural thing . . . To be human, of course, also means to be sinful, to be blind and disconnected from God. But through Jesus, we see humanity as it was meant to be; a way of being knit together with other people—it means relationships.

In a messy and fleshy way, Jesus makes 3D the promises of health and life in Isaiah and of the Psalms. Jesus in the Gospel of Mark shows that the reason for messiness, the need for discomfort, the patience to listen, and the openness to pain . . . is, in fact, God's own love. At the center of it all is love.

Scripture tells us that God created us in God's image. And to be truly human, as Jesus was made truly human, is to truly love. And to love, as God loved the world, is to become open to all this "messiness."

As a community of people who believe in this God-made-flesh, we are not purveyors of perfection, we're not tidy or quick, we're not without conflict or decay or problems. But at the heart of what we do, of who we are as human beings and children of God—we genuinely believe—at the heart, is God's own love.

Amen.