

“CONTINUING EDUCATION”

Isaiah 35:4-7a; Mark 7:24-37

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The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

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I remember the last time it happened to me. I was sitting in a coffee shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I had come there to interview a young Pakistani Muslim woman, a Harvard graduate student, about why she chose to cover, to wear a head scarf as a sign of her religious observance. She was second generation American. Her father had emigrated to the United States before she was born and now taught at Tufts University. Her mother, though a practicing Muslim, had chosen for reasons of assimilation not to cover. This young woman had made different choices for herself; and in the midst of our discussion of her choices, she told me that she was getting married at the end of the year.

I asked her about her fiancé, and she told me she didn't know who he was yet, that her parents were arranging the marriage for her. I was stunned, and asked her, as tactfully as I knew how, why her parents, who in other things respected her choices, would force her into an arranged marriage. She looked at me as if I were a not-too-bright child, and explained that she was not being forced. “Marriage is too important a decision to be left to the whims of young people,” she told me, and then explained what she had observed about what she called “marriage of choice,” the Western cultural norm. She lamented the romantic misadventures of her classmates. She cited the high divorce rate, and the many who seemed unhappy in their marriages. From where she stood, marriage of choice seemed like a highly risky, not too intelligent venture. “My parents are more mature than I,” she explained to me. “They know what a good marriage requires. They know me, and what will make me happy. I know they will make a good choice for me.” While I was trying to absorb all this, she delivered the coup de grace: “You have young daughters. Do you like the men they choose for themselves?” And I had to laugh because pretty much all of us who have children over the age of puberty have sometimes questioned our children's judgment. Right?

But that's not the important part. The important part is that I had always thought of arranged marriage as backwards, coercive, unenlightened. This young woman - bright, independent, articulate - chose it. She chose it because it seemed to her to be far more sensible and conducive to happiness than my standard which is marriage of choice. And in that moment I realized that it's not as I had imagined it: a clear cut case between right and wrong, better and worse. It is, instead, a matter of culture and expectation and choice. I had been blinded by cultural assumptions I did not even know I was making, and it was time for me to think again.

A Gentile woman came up to Jesus, so distraught over her daughter's illness that she would approach a Jewish rabbi and miracle man, and she begged him to cure her daughter. Jews and Gentiles kept separate from each other, completely separate; it was an act of brazen desperation on her part to solicit the rabbi's help. Jesus' first impulse was simply to dismiss her. She was not one of his; of that distinction he was clear. It was what he had known all his life, one of the absolutes of his faith. But when he rudely tried to drive her away, she challenged him. She pushed back against that absolute boundary,

and after what must have been a moment of shock for him, her words pushed through; and what he saw before him changed. No longer did her identity begin and end in Gentile: different, apart, not my business; but she became human, a mother, a suffering person reaching out and, without a doubt, one of his. He healed her daughter, and then changed his journey to tarry in the land of the Gentiles, teaching and healing, his definition of himself and his mission revised.

This is one of the most important stories of the Gospel, the story of the day that the Word Made Flesh saw himself in error and changed his mind. Now there are some who believe that the idea of Jesus changing his mind is blasphemous. They say this story and Jesus' rude and dismissive words were a teaching tool for his disciples, because the one who knew God and was God couldn't have made mistakes. But the Gospels tell us that Jesus was human, fully human; and because he was human, like all of us as adult humans, he looked at the world through a certain sense of cultural, religious assumptions and biases that he never questioned as reality, never wondered at as the way things were and should be. . .until someone dared to confront his prejudice, to make him think, then rethink; and he took one of the major rock bottom assumptions of his whole life and his faith tradition and walked away from it because new information proved it wrong.

Such an important and powerful story, especially for us in the time and place where we live. Because of communication, politics, and the shrinking of the global community, all of us are being challenged every day concerning our values. What are universal human values and what are cultural values? Where is the line between tolerating difference and tolerating oppression? What is marriage and who can marry and how many times can they marry? Can we accept a plurality of religious voices and ethical systems? What is the good life and how do we get it? What does it mean to live equitably in a world where resources are unequally distributed? How much latitude should we have in genetically choosing our offspring? What does it mean to feel like you've been born in a body of the wrong gender? Do all people want what we want?

So many questions we often want to just cover our ears and retreat to the old truths, many of which have served humanity - or at least us - well up till now; some of which have served us ill, but no one challenged us on it until now. And in the midst of that, we often hear, "my religion says" or "the Bible says," as if that were the end of the discussion rather than the beginning.

The Bible says that Jews and Gentiles should be separate, that Gentile life is of no concern to the people of God. And Jesus lived most of his life believing that, until a strong and desperate Gentile mother pushed back at him, shocked him, made him see through his cultural blindness to the fellow human who stood on the road with him, begging for the life of her daughter. And he changed.

So what am I trying to say here? I don't mean to put forward a world of complete moral relativism, where all claims are equally valid and all so-called truth is equally right. But I do think we live in a world of immense moral complexity made more problematic by the assumptions that are second nature to us, the ones we don't even know we make about what is universal, what is right, what is appropriate. How

do we find solid ground on which to stand if we are not simply to cling to the old familiar places? Well, Jesus did it by listening, actually listening to the criticism of his ways by one who was different from him. Which is not an easy thing to do, probably not for Jesus, certainly not for us. All around our very small world, there are voices raised in opposition to Christian values, to American values, to American Christian values. . .and it's hard, truly hard to listen to them without retreating to a posture of defensiveness. But I would say that it is the example of Jesus and the religious obligation of our faith that we do listen to that which challenges our assumptions. Some of it we will hear, and it will truly find no home in us. But other times, if we truly listen, if we truly see those who stand before us speaking a different truth as human—more like us than not—then sometimes, like Jesus, our minds and hearts will be changed and we will walk away even from what we had thought was the teaching of God all these years. Jesus opens that door for us. The Bible and our religious traditions are meant to be our guides but not our prison cell. Again, it is no less than Jesus who opened the door for us. The question that remains is, “Do we, like him, have the courage and faith to walk through, to create a revised reality, reinterpret the old faith for a new day?” The choice is ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.