

Even Jesus Learns

Sermon 113 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 5, 2021

Mark 7:24-37

From the earliest days of Christianity, people have been trying to figure out and articulate clearly their ideas about who Jesus really is. A babe born in Bethlehem, child of Mary, son of God, raised by Mary and Joseph, the carpenter, baptized by John. The one they found teaching in the Temple, cavorting with lepers and prostitutes, shaming the proud and lifting up the poor. The one who proclaimed divine authority saying the year of God's favor had arrived, that it was a time of jubilee, time to liberate the captives, to redistribute wealth and land, time for the ways of the world to be overturned and replaced by the ways of God's kingdom. Who was, who is, this Jesus?

I know what you're thinking: We know who Jesus is. Our Lord and savior. God incarnate. Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus is the Word of God. God in human form. Son of God, the Messiah, the Great I Am, savior and redeemer of the world, fully God, fully human. Jesus Christ.

Well, these are indeed some of the names we have given to Jesus over the years. Some of them born out of personal experience and others derived from the traditions of our faith. It is important to know, however, that most of the names and titles we give to Jesus were born out of discord, disagreement, and conflict. And at the center of all of this was the question about Jesus' divinity and humanity. Was Jesus a man or a god? Was Jesus half man, half God? Was Jesus fully God, just in human skin? Was Jesus subordinate to God the Creator of the universe or was Jesus equal with that God? These were important questions! Especially within the context of the ancient world in which Judaism (Jesus' religion), was uniquely and extraordinarily monotheistic. What does it mean to worship one God, by the name of Yahweh, and then make room for Jesus of Nazareth?

Early thinkers were ripe with ideas on this matter, but some were more widely accepted than others. Those who found themselves in the minority had to be careful about speaking their minds and sharing their thoughts because they would be deemed heretics.

Among some of the earliest such heretics were the "Adoptionists" who wanted to retain Jesus' full humanity. Their doctrine stated that Jesus was born of Mary, was fully human, and was adopted as the Son of God at the moment of his baptism, or his resurrection. There is, of course, language supporting this in the ancient writings of Paul.

Then, the Gnostics tried to save Jesus from the inherently sinful world of matter (as opposed to the spiritual realm) – they were dualists and saw no overlapping area shared between sacred and secular. In order to redeem Jesus from the material world, from the inherently sinful nature of human skin, they determined that Jesus' body was "apparent" and not "real." Others joined them and those espousing this belief became known as "Docetists."

If the question of Jesus' humanity wasn't enough, soon disagreement emerged about Jesus' relationship to God, whom he called *Abba*. The "Modalists" believed Jesus was not a distinct person but rather the human version of the one God. Others went far in the opposite direction claiming Jesus was distinct from the Creator and subordinate to Him, but yet in divine relationship with God. The theology of Jesus as *logos* of God is born within this school of thought.

With all of this disagreement blooming around who Jesus was and how Jesus was related to God, it soon became apparent that something needed to be done to reunify this emerging movement of early Christians.

In 325 CE, the newly converted Emperor Constantine called the first council of the early church. There, in Nicaea, the presiding bishops gathered to discuss the controversies surrounding Jesus' identity and relationship with God the Creator. While it is widely recognized that even the opinions of the bishops varied, the opinion of a young presbyter, Athanasius carried the day. In short Athanasius stated that Jesus was begotten and not made by God. Therefore Jesus was not creature but creator. Jesus was the same substance of God, but – unlike God the Father and God the Spirit, Jesus had become incarnate.

Although it would have been nice for all to be settled there, in the year 325, the controversy continued and a second ecumenical council convened in 381 CE, this time in Constantinople. In 381 the bishops clarified the language to state that Father, Spirit, and Son were three persons, one God. *Mia ousia, tres hypostaseis*. Three persons, equal in eternity and power. This is where the trinitarian theology most of us know begins to take shape. Baptists are not creedal people, we do not claim the Nicæan or Apostles' Creeds as our own, but if we did, like our mainline brothers and sisters, we would need to know that these councils, are where the creeds are written. They are doctrinal statements born out of controversy, written with a hope of unifying a fracturing church.

Once the Trinitarian relationship was hammered out, the focus of the debate turned to Jesus' nature. Was Jesus divine or human?

From 431 to 451 the councils of Ephesus convened debating the dual natures of the Son. Was he divine or was he human? Did the divine nature pre-exist the human one? And if so, when the incarnation happened, was the divine nature diminished by the human nature? It took twenty years and unending debate before the councils reached a settlement in Chalcedon.

Pope Leo I of Rome declared:

We all unanimously teach... one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, perfect in deity and perfect in humanity... in two natures, without being mixed, transmuted, divided, or separated. The distinction between the natures is by no means done away with through the union, but rather the identity of each nature is preserved and concurs into one person and being.

One might think that after 300 or so years of dialogue, we would have a solid Christology that could withstand the test of time. But the debates didn't end there, Christians continued to conjure up controversy in the Medieval and Reformation periods, as Protestantism grew, and in the 19th and 20th centuries. Friends, I hate to be the one to bear the news, but the debates continue to this day. Who is Jesus?

Why am I telling you all of this? Why the history lesson? ... Because if we do not know our history, we are doomed to repeat it.

This week and last week we are reading from the 7th chapter of Mark. It is a single chapter that perhaps contains two of the most uncomfortable stories from the whole Bible, first because we are left asking ourselves if we, too have been like the religious hypocrites who choose tradition over the people God has called us to love. Now we are faced with a theological challenge as Jesus appears to be corrected, by a Gentile woman, at the table.

The reading picks up with Jesus entering the region of Tyre where he enters a house and tries not to be seen. But during dinner a woman, whose daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, came to him begging for healing. The story reminds us of Jairus, the powerful man who came to Jesus a few chapters earlier begging for his daughter to be healed from her fever. But unlike with Jairus, here, Jesus scolds the woman saying: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Not only did Jesus deny her request but he insulted her in the process, dehumanizing and likening her to a dog. This isn't how Jesus, Son of God, begotten of the Father, eternal and all powerful, *mia ousia, tria hypostaseis*, is supposed to treat people!

Was Jesus having one of those moments (we extroverts have them all the time) when the words come out of the mouth before they have fully made their way through the brain. Moments when you wish you could hit rewind and rewrite the script before playing it forward again with a different outcome? What was Jesus thinking?

The plot twists yet again, when the woman responds with confidence saying: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

In her response, the woman who is alone, foreign, desperate and pleading for a last resort healing for her daughter, teaches Jesus something new about God's love. Jesus is a quick learner in the text and responds by affirming the woman with, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter."

The woman returns home to find her daughter laying on the bed, and the demon gone.

As hard as it is to read this story, these words pouring out of Jesus' mouth, I am glad that it wasn't edited out of Mark's manuscript somewhere along the way. I am glad because this story stands to remind us of Jesus' humanity that somehow in God's own mystery co-existed with his divinity (even though, we tend to overlook it). Jesus was, according to our tradition, fully divine *and* fully human. And where we see that coming through the text

today is that Jesus, in his full humanity, *learns*. In his humanity and in a very human experience of humility, Jesus is taught by an outsider, a woman on the margins, a mother pleading for her child... even Jesus learns... and he is taught by someone who quite literally didn't even have a seat at the table.

I spent about an hour and a half in line at the DMV the other week and as I waited in line, I overheard the two men behind me discussing a whole range of topics. Eventually, they made their way to politics and I began to worry that their newly forming friendship might deteriorate into argument and disagreement. But as their conversation progressed the most amazing thing happened. Although they had different opinions about some things, they each listened to one another – even saying at times, “I’ve learned something from you today.” It was a rare and hopeful reminder that humility and growth *are* still possible.

So often we experience the opposite as we seek to engage one another on all kinds of topics. We feel pressure to know it all, to stand firm in our convictions, and to maintain the party line which insists we are right and everyone else is wrong. We have become slow to listen, slow to learn.

Even the church, which is supposed to be the body of Christ, can be slow to listen, slow to learn, slow to be stretched and challenged by outsiders who sometimes see our limits more clearly than we can see them ourselves. Like Jesus’ initial response to the Syrophenecian woman, we sometimes allow our humanity to overshadow our divine calling as we either explicitly or implicitly say to those who come seeking healing or hope: *You are not welcome here. What we have is not intended for you.*

Sometimes I wonder if we have spent so much time trying to understand God, trying to articulate within the limitations of language theologies and Christologies that summarize the mystery of God’s self-revelation in the Trinity that we have forgotten the most obvious reality there is: our own humanity.

No matter how many years we spend in councils, conferences, Sunday school classes, and small groups, we will never escape the limitations of our human experience... and therefore it might serve us well to remember that *even Jesus*, in *his* humanity, had things to learn.

Even Jesus learned that God’s grace extended beyond Jerusalem.

Even Jesus learned that God’s healing was available to all who asked.

Even Jesus learned that God’s nature could be shown in the face of a mother pleading for her child.

Even Jesus learned that God’s dreams for the world were bigger than what Jesus originally realized.

And if Jesus had so much to learn in one single encounter... how much more do we have to learn as well?

The question is, will we be humble enough to listen, to grow, and to be shaped by those who we didn't realize deserved a place at our table?

It took nearly 300 years for the debate to reach Nicaea, then it took 125 more years before the compromise of Chalcedon which attempted to put into words the mystery of the incarnation of God in human flesh. Fully divine, fully human. Two natures in one body... a walking, talking, expression of one part of the Triune God. Clear as mud, right? It is no wonder the debate didn't really end there, in 451, but that it continues throughout our history and even into the present.

But what I love about this history is the same thing I love about this encounter between Jesus and the Syrophonecian woman in Mark's Gospel. They both stand to remind us that despite our best efforts to figure things out, to get things right, to understand what God is doing, and to articulate it with our words so that the debate can end... sometimes the most beautiful thing happens in the midst of the debate itself... *we learn from one another.*

And as we learn, we grow and expand, allowing God's vision to re-create our understanding about *what* the church is and *who* the good news is for.

Perhaps like the bishops who convened in Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, we too might continue to wrestle with new ideas and old ideas, with new relationships and old ones... and perhaps we too might allow our theologies, Christologies, and doctrines to be ever-expanding through listening, through humility and with all kinds of grace.

Because if our history and the Gospel have anything to teach us... maybe it begins deep within the humanity of Jesus and the revelation that *even Jesus learns.*

... and maybe it's OK if we have something to learn too.