

Crossing Boundaries

Mark 7:24-37

A couple of years ago, when I began organizing the upcoming Global Baptist Peace Conference, most who learned of it were not impressed. In fact, very few of my colleagues, friends, or family members ever hinted to me that they were intrigued and excited about the prospect; not one would indicate they would plan to attend.

I was genuinely surprised and somewhat disappointed, if not perplexed, given how successful our last conference was in 2009, where in Rome we had over 450 people in attendance representing 53 countries—a glorious week with grassroots activists from six different continents which is still paying dividends. Why wasn't there immediate enthusiasm for a similar experience?

Almost to a person, the initial reaction was due to its location, i.e., Cali, Colombia. Why there, I was asked repeatedly? Why organize an international gathering of peacemakers in the cocaine capital of the world? Isn't Cali known as a notoriously violent trafficking center for the Colombian drug cartels? Who wants to go there? That's like planning an event in Syria, Afghanistan, or Somalia! Are you crazy, Hayes?

I get it. I understand the reaction I received. Except, as I tried to explain, the issue isn't the location, it's the skewed perception people have of Colombia, simply because our limited knowledge of this city, or country, or continent. Most have heard it's a place to avoid. What good can possibly come from it? A charge, mind you, not unlike what Jesus heard about his own hometown of Nazareth.

Perceptions rarely tell the whole story. It reminded me of when I traveled throughout Eastern Europe or former Soviet Union years ago

before the walls came tumbling down. Frequently, I would encounter average people who had an ugly and ungrounded assessment of my home country (as if they knew, since they hadn't been there)—nevertheless, citing the crime-riddled character of our cities, or the racial injustices and bigoted behavior of people in American society, or the corrupt nature of capitalism. That's what they heard America was like. They couldn't imagine the benefits of democracy (“utterly flawed and chaotic”), as their perception was shaped by a history of authoritarian rule. The common perception was how frightening it must be to live in a country with all the violence and crime, chaos and corruption. Then, I'd return home and hear a corresponding slam made on the Soviet bloc countries. Who's right?

Obviously, perceptions are often inaccurate and colored by fears, disinformation, discrimination, or ignorance. That applies to so many things in life. Most of what we perceive gets shaped by the environments in which we live. We absorb and often embrace the dominant views and beliefs we are accustomed to hearing (along with the prejudices that come with them) without recognizing them for what they likely are, i.e., distortions and incomplete portrayals of reality. These cultural biases continue on relatively unchallenged as negative or overly positive stereotypes of other people or places until we experience a contrasting view from another perspective.

For this reason, I've often believed that travel (particularly international) is the best form of education. I've learned a great deal from it. Despite our skills at mass communication, so much of our world remains steeped in misconceptions of what others are like with their similarities and differences. We assume we already understand based on some bits and pieces of information or impressions we've garnered, which

then is expanded to characterize everyone and everything about that specific place. That's exactly how stereotypes work. They are short-hand generalizations from which positive or negative judgments are drawn. Though many biases people maintain are fairly inconsequential, some can be quite harmful, especially when they are invoked by those with power and remain unchallenged.

That said, it's hard not to be prejudiced in some way. We are basically tribal as human beings. We develop our sense of identity from and among those with whom we share common traits, values, and location. Thus, I've noticed how tribal roots shape my perspective on life, as well as my positive or negative impressions of others. The same holds true for you.

Dr. Saul Levine, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of California, San Diego, commented on this matter of tribalism earlier this year in a blog for *Psychology Today*:

We humans are a social species, tribal by nature. We're given to gathering and communing in familiar groups. "Belonging," our capacity and need for empathy, compassion and communication, is in our DNA...A sense of Belonging is a cornerstone of "The Four B's" (including Being, Believing and Benevolence), the criteria we use to evaluate the quality of our lives.

Belonging is the extent to which we feel appreciated, respected and cared for as a member of a group of close people. These groups vary widely and might comprise family, friends, colleagues, teammates, coworkers, congregationalists or platoons. When we belong in these groups, we share values, rituals and attitudes, we experience feelings of warmth and welcome, and our lives are enriched.

Studies show that a sense of Belonging is related to feelings of well-being and better health. Conversely, loneliness is known to be detrimental to one's physical and mental health. But while we value the importance of Belonging, dangers lurk when there is an absence of Benevolence. Excessive group cohesiveness and feelings of superiority breed mistrust and dislike of others and can prevent or destroy caring relationships. Estrangement can easily beget prejudice, nativism, and extremism. These are the very hallmarks of zealous Tribalism which has fueled bloodshed and wars over the millennia. ¹

¹ Saul Levine, "Belonging is our Blessing, Tribalism is our Burden," *Psychology Today*, February 24, 2018.

Levine summarized his comments with this line: “Belonging is a boon to our existence, ennobling our lives, but Tribalism is a bane to our existence, destroying that very ennoblement.”

Returning to my earlier point, it seems a useful way to overcome tribalism and biases we (or others) hold is to literally cross the very boundaries where those firm lines of distinction are made (where differences are exploited) in order to engage others as we can to challenge the perceptions and prejudices that are held. This is by no means a new idea, but it remains a very effective way to often push us beyond the inclinations we may have toward tribalism, along with the fear-mongering it usually perpetuates. Knowledge and engagement with those who are outside of our particular tribes or comfort zones is exactly what we need to do in these strident times when so much divides us with bitter rancor and partisanship.

As a point of reflection along these lines, I invite us to examine this story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman—one of the more profound and provocative stories in all the gospels. For one thing, if there’s a perception we have of Jesus as being morally flawless, then this is likely the one story in the gospels that will challenge it, since Jesus seems to come up short by revealing his prejudices against someone outside of his Jewish tribe—an interesting anecdote that makes him appear more human than what we would otherwise consider divine.

I admit, it’s hard to fully grasp the entire context of this passage, so we’re left to read it as it is—Jesus crossed over from the familiar confines of the Galilee region and its majority Jewish population and went to Tyre, a city in Phoenicia—a region north and west of Galilee (approximately where Lebanon and southern Syria meet) inhabited mainly by Gentiles (non-

Jews) and particularly those who were descended from the native peoples of Canaan (cf. Mt. 15:21ff). We already know of the bitter rivalry that existed between Judeans and Samaritans; one could add Syro-Phoenicians to the list of outsiders as well, even though, if anything, they shared a distant memory of Israelites claiming the land and driving out the Canaanites—a history that seems quite familiar to the current Middle Eastern landscape.

Why Jesus chose to journey there is hard to know; maybe he was imitating the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Once there, he seemed to avoid any contact with the locals, as we're told he anonymously secluded himself in a house. But his reputation as a healer was already making his a public name, so he was soon discovered. With that came an unnamed Syro-Phoenician woman seeking help for her demon-possessed child.

As a religious Jew, one might think Jesus could have been taught to avoid people like her because of concerns about ritual purity; but that issue never seemed to be of concern for Jesus. His reticence here, though, could well be due to the derogatory cultural stereotypes made of indigenous people. Galileans were routinely ridiculed by the more urbane Judeans for their coarse manner; in turn, it wasn't surprising Galileans would return the favor toward indigenous Phoenicians. Plus, she was a woman, already disposed to a lower place on the social hierarchy.

So, when this woman made her earnest plea to Jesus, (surprising to us) he responded as pejoratively as any Galilean Jew would, i.e., with a rather offensive insult: "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, back off woman, since Jesus felt obligated to serve his own people and shouldn't be compelled to bother with non-Jews until he had finished his work among

his own. The derogatory term Jesus used to refer to this woman and her kind was a fairly conventional racial or social insult used throughout the Middle East (based on that dogs largely were feral and viewed as filthy scavengers). As an insult, we should be a bit surprised it came from Jesus. But, as we often forget, he was human. He seemed to have his prejudices, too.

However, the woman's response was also unexpected, as she called him on it with some clever psychological ju-jitsu. Instead of taking offense at his rather racist and sexist comment, she returned a barb right back at him, while maintaining her case. "Sir, even dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." In other words, even his own tribal interests couldn't deny someone in need, when she could indirectly receive aid while he still addressed his intended. It was a clever retort—something I think caught Jesus off guard in the moment—one (as I like to imagine) sparked some immediate laughter. I think he appreciated her clever twist on his comment (perhaps, even with a smile and chuckle) and applauded her trust in him, in spite of himself, by granting the woman her request. In so doing, according to Mark's gospel anyway, this is precisely when Jesus crossed a cultural boundary of his own by performing his first healing of a Gentile.

Though I would interpret the primary message of this story to be a later church midrash on why Jews and Gentiles were to mutually receive the mercies of God, it still reveals an insight into the humanity of Jesus as an ethnocentric Galilean Jew. As much as Christian tradition overdoes it to portray Jesus as inerrantly divine (hence, making this story seem out of character, if not sacrilegious), I genuinely value this story as a demonstration of his humanity. Intended or not, it is a story about Jesus' own latent bias and need to cross a boundary, which was revealed and

overcome by the tenacity of this indigenous woman who would not be denied.

Humans are inherently tribal and we behave as such with our prejudicial actions, colorful language, and limited outlooks. It takes intentional effort to cross boundaries that are prescribed by our identity and ethnicity. We inherit many biases for or against certain people and tribes, most of whom are defined as allies, rivals, or enemies. Our default is to protect our own interests, which means defending our tribe against assault or threats. In our baser instincts, we build walls along those boundaries, rather than muster the courage to bridge them to gain a new perspective. It takes willpower and dedication to cross boundaries to engage others and overcome the stereotypes we harbor.

The basic lesson for us is obvious. Crossing boundaries is an important act of redemption that will provide enlightenment and corrective vision for how we wrongly and unfairly perceive others. It is instructional, spiritually beneficial, and healing to the entire human race, as we invest ourselves in honest humility, rather than presume superiority over others by provincial delusion or racial arrogance. I would add that, in this historical moment, it is even crucial for the welfare of humanity that we attempt to cross as many boundaries as we can—whatever they may be and wherever they are—so we will learn more about those who are not like us, at the very least to counter the forces that are driving our world to militant and bigoted extremes.

Wherever our tribal boundaries may be—cultural, racial, religious, intellectual, social, psychological, etc.—it's important to identify what and who is on the other side. Try to find someone to engage into a conversation to hear their story, to find out what they think and why they see the world

as they do. Read more about places where you've not been; try to understand people you are not likely to encounter. Share thoughts on what you value—for you may be surprised to find there are many things you actually share in common.

Our enemies in this world—whatever that means and wherever that applies—are simply *people*—living human beings made in the image of God who exist with a daily life and who search for meaning and purpose in what they do. The primal obstacle we face (and often characterize as evil) between us and them is the ignorance we are content to live with. They may see things differently than we do, but there's usually far more reasons to trust them, than fear. So, build bridges instead of walls! Overcome prejudice, stereotypes, and cheap rhetoric with curiosity and understanding. Love others as even Jesus himself had to learn at times how to love more fully.

In the end, it will be a better world and we will be made the better for it. By crossing a few more boundaries and entering into other landscapes and human lives, we will likely find many people and places which are more interesting and intriguing, more compelling and colorful, and more divinely blessed and beautiful than, once upon a time, we imagined life would ever be.

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9 September 2018