

Even the Dogs: 15th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17 (22) B, September 1, 2021

“The episodic are the worst of all plots and actions,” writes Aristotle in his *Poetics*; “and by an episodic plot I mean one in which the episodes have no probable or inevitable connections” (1451 b, tr. Grube, 1989). The Philosopher goes on to say that writers compose these sorts of things either because they cannot do better, or because they want (or were told) to showcase an actor with a special gift for tragic or comic performance, or who is good in a fight or with a death scene. In such writings, the episodes don’t follow from one to the other, the characters do not develop, and one does not see the protagonists trying to deal with their flaws or problems. Episodic plots, that is, are nothing more than a typical year in an American high school.

Furthermore, Aristotle continues, in poorly constructed plots, things just happen for no good reason, giving credence to the oft-cited phrase that “life is just one damn thing after another.” Scholars are not sure who said that first, only that it wasn’t H.L. Mencken and it wasn’t Mark Twain. It might’ve been any of a dozen novelists, each putting the thought in the mind of characters they do not like very much, or who have more to learn than even a Dickens novel can give them the space for. One source traced the quote to a coal company’s newspaper in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in 1909. Another found a variant that same year in Topeka, Kansas, only in that instance it that which was “one damn thing after another” was not life, but “baseball.”¹

As it happens, I opened Aristotle’s *Poetics* almost at random this week, while moving books around and putting off writing this sermon. The book opened straight to this passage, as if by a diviner’s art, though at first I thought nothing of it. Reading over the lessons for the day, however, made me think again. This passage from the Gospel of Mark rather at first reads like one of Aristotle’s bad episodic plots: a series of episodes in which we see Jesus do what he does best – showing forth God’s power to improve at least some people’s lives – yet learning nothing. Does he develop, grow, learn to do things differently

¹ See this link for the source: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/09/02/life-one/>.

based on what happens? He must've done. If Jesus lived a fully human life, as the New Testament and most subsequent theology says he did, he could hardly have done so without learning a lot along the way, even if he chose to ignore the lessons, or the writers didn't know how to frame them. It would speak pretty poorly of the incarnation if God in human form were only and always in Broadcast Mode, not really paying much attention to what the people around him said and did, learning nothing from them, never having to face his own limitations and blind spots, and doing on each new day no more and no different than he'd done the day before.

Yet often this is how Jesus is imagined, as though he went through the world with holy blinders on, never learning anything because he, as God's son, was already perfect and had nothing to learn. I suspect this sort of thing comes from a typical misreading of such verses as Hebrews 13:8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." The same savior, that is, abiding after his ascension much as he had been since his resurrection, if differently than from the time of his incarnation to his death. Yet that does not mean, and cannot mean, that he didn't have to learn things the same way we do, from eating and walking and potty training to learning his letters and how to take care of himself and get used to, in roughly this order: his manhood, the imperfection of his parents, the limitations of his teachers (and then his own), and the fundamental injustice of his world, this last being cast in sharp relief this week in places ranging from Afghanistan to Haiti to Louisiana and then to Texas, whose legislature appears able to do nothing except pass laws that are nigh on maniacally evil. Those who claim to follow a God of love and compassion would do well to remember that all of us have much to learn, perhaps most when we least realize it, and to be humble and gracious as we explore all possible meanings of the two great commandments: to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. As such a follower, I am bound to remind those who control Afghanistan and Texas that to love one's neighbor as oneself can never mean seeking to take away her right or her ability to work, to learn, to vote, to dress as she likes, to move about as she likes, to obtain medical care, to protect herself in a pandemic, to leave the country, or to control her own body and whether or not she has children, or chooses not to.

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As Jesus learned what he had to, grew, and matured, he was the same Word that was with God, and was God – and yet new every morning, based on what he'd learned the day before. This is as it should be, and as it must be. God does not always say the same word, nor do words always have the same meaning yesterday and today and forever. A tree is the same tree from seed to full bloom, in summer's leaf and winter's bareness. An insect is the same insect from larva to pupa to adult, and back again. Things change while they remain themselves, and the changes are essential to what it means for them to be themselves. It can have been no less true for Jesus than for anything else God made.

The essence of life is change – *viz.*, descent with modification, as the scientists tell us pertains in things ranging from fractal geometry to evolution. The very language in which I speak today and in which you hear me did not exist when Jesus walked to Tyre, all the way up there, for some reason, and then back again by way of Sidon. Words, like people, are living powers – and, like people, change over time and can have enormous impact when they do. At the heart of today's gospel passages is the power of words to change lives – and, as part of doing so, to change minds, and enable them to be changed, and in time even to change themselves.

We take the second of the two gospel episodes first. On his way back from Tyre and Sidon, Jesus finds people bringing him someone in need. He cannot hear words, and he has trouble speaking words. Jesus takes him aside, examines him, and then speaks the word that restores to the man the power to use them, and all other sounds. *Ephphatha*, Jesus says, making this word of freedom and restoration the first word the man ever heard.

Typically, Jesus asks the people to tell no-one about this, but they simply ignore him. Zeal can have that effect on people. Being set free, or seeing someone set others free, makes you want to shout it out loud, and also to do whatever you want, no matter what anybody says. One of Jesus's challenges is that he never seems to get his mind around this. If you do good in the world, the world will notice, and there's nothing you can do to stop that. Will it make them go and do likewise? Maybe, but more often it makes them want to seek you out and have you do good to them, too. I often wonder how Jesus processed

this, and what it taught him about the human beings for whom he would eventually die to save from the power of their sins. “They seek me out, and they want my power,” I imagine him saying, “But no matter how much of it I give them, they do not learn to do as I do, and do not listen to what I say.”

Which brings us back to episode one: the woman whose daughter is mentally ill. What we name as mental illnesses ranging from schizophrenia to bipolar disorder the ancients understood as being possessed by an unclean spirit. In thrall to one of these, you are not in control of your body or your mind, which is as violating an experience as one can have. Imagine the horror that mother went through, watching something force her daughter’s body and mind to do what it wanted, unable to stop it? What remedy would she not have tried to set her daughter free?

Who knows why he went up there – Jesus, that is. Perhaps he just wanted to go to the beach, have a good look at the western sea, feel the waves against his body, smell the salt air, watch the sun go down at night over the water. Maybe he just wanted to get away from his own people for a while, spend a day without anyone asking him to fix things, explain things, or make everything all better now. Maybe his Father led him there to teach him something. The episodic plot of Mark does not tell us, so we must imagine the reason. I suspect that Jesus was tired and a little scared, but also that grace was at work in him without his knowledge, seeking to expand that knowledge as well as his sense of compassion, and of the universality of his mission and ministry. God, that is, wanted him to learn what it takes to make a man care about women he could help, but might not want to or realize he should.

She had heard about him, the gospel says, which means that word of what he was doing has spread beyond Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. She knew who he was, or at least someone in town did, which is why she soon knew where to find him. When she got there, however, she got the shock of her life. He heard her plea, understood her problem, but, at least at first, simply didn’t give a damn.

You don't get to do that, even when the person asking for help is not one of you, not of your *ethnos* or religion, no relation, no-one who can do anything for you. You don't get to do that simply because you're tired or scared or have your mind halfway down the road on its way to somewhere else, or just because you can. You don't get to deny people help in times of need because you're worried you won't have enough for your own, sometime in the future – and certainly not when your power comes straight from God and in abundance. You don't get to be a man who puts roadblocks in the way of woman seeking your help to free her daughter from something that is controlling her body and her mind against her will.

Jesus apparently had to learn that – in real time, from a woman's lips, as she jiu-jitsu'd his Jewish disdain for her Gentile person, her impertinence (to him) and her needs, told her that she had to wait, that she wasn't the right kind for him to help, that she was second-class, second-rate, should get to the back of the line and the back of the bus, wait her turn till he'd helped the people God wanted to help first, no matter how sick her daughter was or how low-down and dirty that spirit was doing her. His insult to her was both targeted and off-hand, and a fundamental misunderstanding of his own mission and purpose. "It is not right to give to dogs the food meant for children," we are told he said, thereby calling two women in need "dogs" who, as far as he was concerned, could bloody well starve until the people who mattered had their fill.

"Perhaps," she replied, "yet even the dogs eat what the children drop. Can't we at least have a little crumb of the immense healing power that the Almighty has baked in you? Asking for a friend..."

It hit him like a body blow, but he took the blow like a man. He realized in that instant how wrong he had been, and how right this woman was – and said so. The episodic plot-writing does not delve into what he thought, or whether his face grew hot and red as he did so, but it gives us enough to allow us to say that probably did, that he corrected his error at once, and never again showed disdain to a foreigner or disrespect to a woman, or to anyone in need. He learned in that instant that a key part of his mission and ministry

was to listen, to understand people's needs and to respect their dignity, their worth, and their autonomy, and that God's grace was given to all, equally, without regard for who they were or where they were from. He learned that talking back to him could be an act of faith, that God's power was greater than any human could imagine, and that part of being human was to easily forget that fact, and become weak, pusillanimous, and afraid.

The woman from Syria – or from Syro-phoenicia, if you insist – had learned what Jesus in the next episode was frustrated that people back home hadn't: how to do what he did, and what to say. She taught him a new way to use his power, and reminded him what it was for: to make human lives better, healthier, and free.

The woman's daughter got better. The filthy spirit left her, Jesus having used his power to give her back control over her own body and mind. Her mother had asked for nothing else, certainly nothing for herself, though she received the greatest gift a parent can: a child restored. As chains heavy and burdens undue have fallen hard on far too many of the world's women since last I spoke to you from this pulpit, it is well that we recall how much power and grace this woman from Syria was able to put into her words, and into the gospel's words, about what God thinks about such chains and such burdens.

As Jesus says elsewhere, evils may come, but woe to those by whom they come. As he also says, woe to those cities who do not repent, for had the deeds of power and words he spoke in them have been done or said in Tyre or Sidon, they would have repented long ago (Matthew 11, Luke 12). Scholars ponder why, in that passage, he brings up those two cities just then. Does not the story of the women from there tell us all we need to know? He knew how strong and good those cities were because of what this mother from there had made him do for her daughter. She'd told him, she'd showed him, and he learned.

Mark's episodic writing can't hide that; perhaps it never meant to. The takeaway: listen to people in need, particularly women and those not from among your own, and respond to what those needs are with all that God has given you. This is faith – which, as the epistle of James reminds us, without works that put in into practice and make a real difference in people's lives, is dead. Even the dogs know that.

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