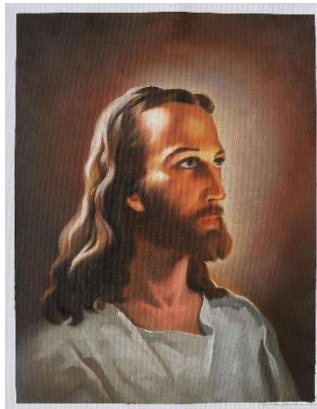
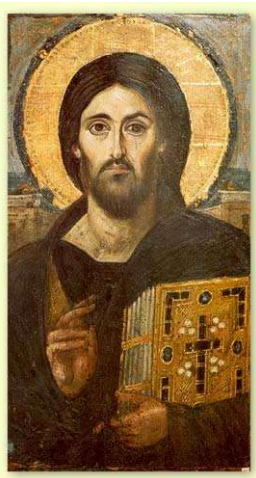


Proper 18A: Mark 7:24-37
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
September 8, 2021

Going Out of the Way

Jesus has been depicted in various ways over the centuries, with many of the greatest artists in the world employing their talents to capture and convey the person and likeness of the Savior. From icons to El Greco, Raphael to Rembrandt, Sallman to Sacred Heart:

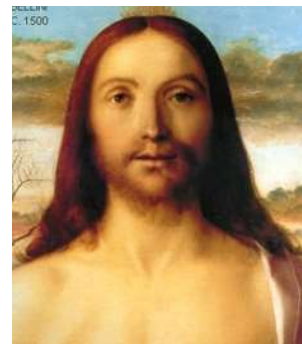
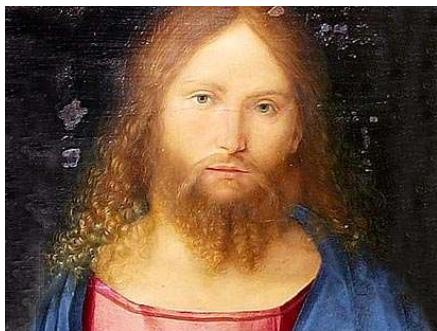


These images of Jesus have become part of our faith, indeed part of our culture, the culture of the West. This is not to say that they have always been warmly received. Sometimes an artist depicts Jesus in a way that shocks and maybe even upsets us.



This painting was created by Stanley Rayfield, a local artist here in Richmond. This picture may not shock us today, but it wasn't too long ago when a depiction of Jesus as a black man was very controversial, as it was in 1962, when Ronald Harrison created "The Black Christ" in response to the injustices of the apartheid in South Africa.

Harrison's crucifixion was intentionally political, to make a statement. But Rayfield insists that his was not. He just wanted to show Jesus in a way that his people, his fellow blacks, would recognize. And the fact is, that aim isn't really any different than the depictions of Jesus we see in European art. Indeed, it's not just Europeans who've made Jesus look like them. Christians of every color and nationality have sought to depict Jesus as "one of us," someone who looks like us, who wears the same clothes, someone we can relate to.



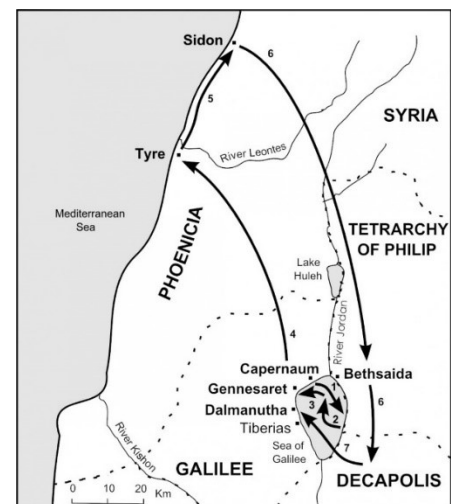
Of course Jesus is neither black or white, not Asian or Native American. He's Jewish, Middle Eastern, and most likely looked something like this.



Nevertheless, the impulse to make Jesus “one of us” stands on a legitimate theological principle: at the Incarnation, God became human, became one of us. The problem then is not that we make Jesus look like us; it is when we insist that we have exclusive claim on him. Because Jesus is Savior for all of us.

That is the point of this morning’s Gospel lesson. Here Jesus leaves his fellow Jews and crosses the border into Gentile lands, places where other, non-Jewish people lived, to show that God’s grace extends beyond the nation of Israel to all people.

To set the scene, recall that Jesus has been busy all this time in Galilee, feeding the 5,000, walking on water, disputing with the Pharisees and scribes over handwashing. Jesus had enough of the arguing and the attention and leaves to go to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Now, those place names don’t mean a lot to us today. But Tyre is not anywhere close to Galilee. Tyre is a good 20 miles northwest over some tough mountains. It would be like us going from here, across the mountains to Staunton or Massanutten. Not an easy journey, especially *by foot*. And after Tyre, Mark tells us, Jesus heads back to Galilee—by way of Sidon (the opposite direction of Galilee), before swinging far to the east on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, then south to another Gentile-occupied area, the Decapolis.



Only then does he return to Jewish soil, on the *other side* of the lake. You may not catch how ridiculous that route is, but it’s a major detour! It’s not something you do on a whim, if you are Jewish. You had to really want to go there, to Tyre and Sidon, had to have a good reason to make the trek, and once you got there, it’s not like you would be welcome there either, as Tyre and Sidon were known for their hostility to Jews.

So Jesus *must* have had a purpose for going to Tyre, a reason beyond just wanting some R&R. So what was that reason if not to make a point, to teach the disciples a lesson?

That lesson comes with an encounter with a very pushy woman. This woman, a foreigner, a Gentile pagan, comes up out of the blue, begging Jesus to do something about her sick daughter, who is beset by a demon.

Knowing Jesus to be a merciful healer, who has compassion for all people, we figure he would happily comply. And when he doesn't, we're dumfounded. Does Jesus not care about this woman and her daughter? Is it because he's running low on healing power? Surely not. So is it something about the woman, about her not being Jewish? Is Jesus *racist*? Some justice-minded preachers today think so. And they see this as an instance where someone, a *woman!*, challenges Jesus' narrowmindedness and prejudice, and sets him straight.

Maybe. But I'm not all that convinced. Because remember that map: Jesus has gone out of his way to go to a Gentile region, a place where he knew he wouldn't be accepted, where the inhabitants would be hostile towards him. It strikes me as unbelievable that Jesus would go all that way just to tell these Gentiles that God doesn't care about them.

So what then are we to make of Jesus' response? "Let the children (that is the children of Abraham, the Jews) be fed first. It's not right to take bread from the children and throw it to the dogs." We have to admit that sounds rather rude.

But this is not the last word. It's just the opening gambit, the serve in a tennis match. The Syro-Phoenician woman accepts that serve and hits it back to Jesus: "But even puppies get fed leftovers from the table, don't they?" In other words, "Yes, I understand that I am not deserving of God's mercy. But I am asking for it anyway." I'd like to think that at this point Jesus gets a sly grin on his face. "Yes, you've got it, you understand. And for your tenacity, for your chutzpah, your daughter is healed. The demon is gone."

This woman is not a Jew. She's an "other," an outsider. Worse, she's a member of a people who have been enemies of God's people going back a thousand years. She has no claim on Jesus' time, or God's mercy. But she got in Jesus' face, breaking the rules not just for Gentile-Jewish relations, but also for men and women. It would have been unheard of for a woman back then to speak to a man who wasn't her husband. But she did, fearlessly, brazenly. And Jesus rewarded her gumption. She wasn't Jewish, but she showed what it meant to be an Israelite. Israel, you'll remember, means 'he who wrestles with God.' It's the name Jacob is given when he wrestled with the angel, refusing to let go until he blessed him. That's what this woman did, she refused to take 'no' for an answer, refused to let Jesus go until he blessed her.

But Jesus isn't done, his trip through Gentile territory isn't over. After Tyre, Jesus and gang travel way out of the way again to go to another Gentile land, the Decapolis. There he meets another soul in need. A deaf-mute is brought to Jesus by some friends for healing. Jesus takes him aside alone, performs some gestures with spit and hand motions, then heals him. This second miracle is not as memorable as the first. But it's enough to make the Gentiles declare, "He does everything well!"

So here we have two stories of Jesus going to foreign lands, to peoples who are hostile to him, but who need God's mercy. Up to this point, Jesus has been preaching and teaching among his fellow Jews, performing healings and other works of power. But here he turns away from his people for a short time, to go where he is needed, crossing borders to make a point. He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world, the literal embodiment of God's grace for all of us.

That is not to take away from Jesus' Jewishness, however. Jesus was born a Jew and was a faithful Jew throughout his life. As he said, he came not to abolish the Jewish faith, but to fulfill it. And fact is, he would not have been known, wouldn't have been recognized as the Messiah, had he appeared in some other culture, some other people. Yet Jesus is not just the Savior of the Jews. As those paintings of Jesus illustrate, Jesus is for all peoples.

To be sure, Jesus *begins* his mission with his own people, in his own backyard. In Matthew's account of the same story, Jesus explains to the woman, "I came for the lost sheep of Israel." That is, his mission was to his fellow Jews. But the mission of his disciples will be to take his message *beyond* the Jews to all the nations. As Paul says later, "The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek," that is, to Gentiles. (Rom 1:16) First the Jews, then the Gentiles. And even though Jesus was clear about *his* mission, he literally goes out of his way to show his disciples, to model for them, how they will, after his death, share the gospel with other peoples, how they will be "a light to the nations."

And Christian missionaries have ever since been doing just that, taking the message of Jesus to outsiders, to foreign lands and often hostile people—west to Europe, east to Asia, and south to North Africa, reaching as far as India, Ireland and Ethiopia. Later missionaries took the gospel further, to the far-off lands of Japan, to the deepest parts of Africa and the remotest regions of South America, to show that Jesus is for all of us.

That is not to say that missionaries have always represented Jesus perfectly. There's been plenty of missteps, chauvinism, failed opportunities to make connections, times they have been culturally insensitive and blind to how they brought not just the gospel, but the assumptions and values of their own culture. But those mistakes don't mean we should keep the Gospel to ourselves.

Some years ago I spoke with the search committee of a large suburban church that had seen some decline in attendance in recent years. I was familiar with the area, so I asked about their outreach to the Indian population that I knew was growing in the neighborhood around them. They first looked shocked by the question and then admitted it wasn't on their radar. A year later I drove by that church and saw that the Methodist church across the street had not one but two different Indian language services, and the place was bustling. It was a lot quieter across the street...

What Jesus' foray into foreign lands shows us is Jesus doesn't belong to us. Jesus belongs to all peoples. As we see in Revelation, when everything is as it should be, there will be among the worshippers in heaven "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation and race and tribe and tongue," singing praises to God (Rev 7:9).

As these two Gentile encounters with Jesus show, it doesn't matter what kind of people someone is, it wasn't a barrier to God's love. No one is beyond the pale of God's grace.

Which is good news for us. For it just as Jesus went to Gentile lands, Jesus comes to us, to the hostile territory that is our lives, our towns and cities.

And so we trust that we, unclean Gentiles though we are, will not be excluded but will be given a place at the table. "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under God's table," we admit. But God's character is always to have mercy. There is a wideness in God's mercy, a wideness that includes Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, black and white, respected and despicable, lovable and unlovable, sinner and saint—all of us. Thanks be to God!