

Sermon: Jesus and the Mother Bear**Scripture: Mark 7:24-37****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: September 9, 2018**

My wife, Tracy, and I are different and one way that we are different is in our capacity to tolerate discomfort and conflict. Our personality differences as named by the Enneagram system of personality, in case you know the Enneagram – if not you’ll be hearing about it this year - is that I am a peace-maker 9 and she is an authenticity-seeking 4. So for me it tends to be about peace at all cost and for her about authenticity. As a result she is much more tolerant of discomfort and conflict than I am. She’s also a New Englander and I’m a southern so there’s that thrown on top of our personalities which again makes her less concerned about appearances. And then there’s some roiling Armenian blood running through her veins while I have mostly English and Scottish.

So this all sits in our DNA and in the background when for instance she feels we’re getting a raw deal somewhere and I’m like “eh, c’mon, lets just go” and she’s like “uhm, I don’t think so” and turns to the person behind the desk and sets into the problem she’s having. She looks small so I often want to warn the person on the other end – “don’t let her size fool you, she will not walk away until justice has been served – you will return that item that you are now refusing to or you will refund her the \$8 that you overcharged her, AT&T, or she will find a senator’s voice mail box that’s not full where she can leave a message.” Lately her ire – as it as for many of us has been stoked by all the news

reports of white men in power acting badly and so I tend to lie low and keep the peace when I hear her begin muttering “too many white men in power!” She’s in St. Louis, Missouri at a friends wedding this weekend which is why I’m talking about her freely... just kidding – you better believe I ran this by her!

That Tracy can be intense and eschew pleasantries in the face of what she perceives as injustice and inauthenticity, is doubly true if her children are involved. It’s the Mother Bear thing, you know? I’m sure I’m not the only husband who has had to stand back a few feet when the mother-bear gets triggered and there seems to be a problem or an unfairness done to the children. The #metoo movement is filled with Mother Bears and we men, quite frankly, had *better* be stepping more carefully, we had *better* be watching our tongues if we know what’s good for us! Unfortunately there are still too many of us white-men in power who aren’t responding to all that is surfacing with the appropriate shame, humility, and repentance but with anger and defensiveness and doubling down. We have one of the angriest of us right in the White House in hopes that he’ll bring back the good ole days when our power was absolute and went unchallenged. But if the collective is anything like my wife, men – celebrities, priests, politicians – beware, for these Mother Bear women who sense their children being mistreated, will not back down until justice is served!

Just ask Jesus. Of ALL his interactions with religious scholars and of ALL exchanges with his disciples and with Roman authorities throughout the Gospels - interactions that have quite a bit of conflict -

there is only one, one single passage, where Jesus does not come out on top, and it's when he relates to just such a Mother Bear.

Jesus doesn't lose his cool often either, like he does here. There's when Peter tells him that he won't let him be executed and Jesus says "get behind me Satan" – maybe not Jesus' best moment. Then the overturning of the tables in the temple and the driving out of the money changers – not exactly a shining example of a peace-making Jesus. Or the time he was hungry and saw this little fig tree but it wasn't the season for figs and so he yells at the tree and it withers on the spot. Not Jesus at his finest!

But probably Jesus' biggest mistake was this day - the day he crossed a mother and triggered her Mother Bear response. I mean, to be fair, he was really tired after engaging with crowds and battling with the religious authorities and he felt he had to get away, so the scriptures say "he set out and went away to the region of Tyre, entered a house in hopes that no one would know he was there." But he couldn't escape notice and in bursts a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit. This wasn't just any woman, this was a Greek woman, a non-Jew, a Syrophenician woman. She shouldn't have been there no matter how you sliced it, not only because Jesus needed some alone time, but also because she was a woman out in public alone, because she was unclean, because she was in this demanding mode of a strange man in a strange house! She collapses at Jesus' feet. She's heard of Jesus' power to heal and she is desperate, a last ditch effort to save her daughter; either that or it'll get her killed – which it very well could have:

“please, please cast this demonic presence out of my daughter, please!”

And Jesus, you can imagine, grits his teeth, and has lost his patience completely and snaps at her –

“Let the children eat first! It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs, woman!”

Jesus slaps her with a racial slur – tells her in no uncertain terms that he there for the people of Israel and not Gentiles like her! Now let me be clear, such a response would have been in no way unexpected or inappropriate for the day, for what she had done. Jesus had the right to have the woman removed and executed, the fact that he was settling for insulting her was near the best she could hope for! I imagine that Jesus thought his words would have withered her like his words to the fig tree and that she’d slink out and leave him *finally* alone.

But she did not wither, you see. Instead her Mother Bear emerged. I imagine that God-the-Creator watching from heaven God-the-Son’s interaction and knowing what kind of woman he was engaging was like “oh snap! Jesus you should NOT have said that!” The woman stops her quivering, sets her jaw and raises her eyes, maybe she even stands, and says to Jesus “Sir, even the dogs under the table, eat the children’s crumbs.”

Barbara Brown Taylor describes the moment in this way: “In that moment you can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he is called to do. The Syrophoenician woman’s faith and persistence teach HIM that God’s

purpose for him is bigger than he had imagined, that there is in fact enough of him to go around!"

And Jesus takes pause and then says "for saying that you may go." Or in another translation - "For that teaching, you may go - the demon has left your daughter." And that's what makes Jesus, Jesus - the Son and visible *Incarnation* of the invisible God. Not his infallibility, not his perfection, not his transcendence and his brilliance and capacity to be just better than all the rest of us but in his capacity to be completely human in all the humility that is necessary for being truly human.

He is shamed and crucified unjustly on the cross and he gave himself to that. But before that he, a man, a famous personality, with all the power, the Son of God, for God's sake, is shamed by a woman, a woman with no power and of low position; she nails him! And He, remarkably as a man in that culture - in any culture really - hears and receives that shaming and learns from it; acknowledges that she's got a point and he was wrong. It takes mastery of the ego for a person of power, who is used to being deferred to, to receive a challenge to their authority and their thinking and their attitude and humbly course correct.

The very next story in the Gospel, Jesus is approached by a deaf man and the scripture has this odd little descriptor that says Jesus looks up to heaven and "sighs" just before he says "be opened" and the man's ears are opened. The African American writer Debie Thomas suggests that the sigh is Jesus saying to God - "ok, ok I get it, I'm listening, my ears are opened - all your children, all of them". And Mother God sits there with her arms crossed and says "you got it honey!"

So beware people of power who forsake the little ones and take advantage of the powerless and line their pockets at the expense of the poor; cause you will trigger the Mother-Bear God, and She does not take well, as it is said throughout our scriptures, to the mistreatment of her most vulnerable children. We should fear that Mother God for she will not walk away until justice is served up to overflowing. Beware and Amen!

Offertory

For all the blessings that thread through every aspect of creation and our lives, we give you thanks, God. For your love of even the least and the most marginal, of even us, we give you thanks God. Bless these gifts for the good of your church so your church may contribute to the good of your creation, in Jesus name amen.

Benediction

My God's goodness be yours,
And well, and seven times well, may you spend your lives:
May you be an isle in the sea,
May you be a hill on the shore,
May you be a star in the darkness,
May you be a staff to the weak,
May the love of Jesus fill every heart for you;
And may the love of Jesus fill you for everyone you meet.