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 The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd; Austin, Texas

We're talking this fall about how we're being formed. Notice that I'm using to form as a verb. We are being formed, being shaped. It's almost a bumper sticker to say that the only thing that is constant is change. But it's true that our journeys involve change around us, to us, in us.

The question for us is how we'll let this change, this forming that's always going on, how will we let it shape us in the Way of Jesus. That's what Jesus calls himself, after all, according to the author of John's Gospel...a Way, a path.

And I want to start with a reminder about what our mission is all about. According to the Book of Common Prayer, the mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with each other and with God in Christ.<sup>1</sup> Unity with each other and with God. And if you think about it, it's this mission that undergirds the commandment that we love one another. It undergirds our call to practice forgiveness. It's pretty hard to love someone when you feel no common connection. Pretty hard to forgive when you can't feel some connection of understanding with others. Seeing value and worth in everyone; seeing the image of God in everyone. Somehow understanding that we are connected to each other – united with each other, to use the prayer book's words – that undergirds for us being Christian.

For me, that requires some work and some allowing. It's always for me a work in progress. Jesus offers us an example this morning of how we can let this change in us and around us, how we can let it shape us according to the Way of Jesus. How we can let it bend us towards the mission of the church.

This is a difficult Gospel reading. The author of Mark's Gospel attributes to Jesus words that are troubling. Jesus encounters a Gentile Syrophenician woman, a person outside of his ethnic and religious group and in today's Gospel, the author of Mark attributes to Jesus a slang and derogatory term for those outside of his group. He calls them dogs – not in the way we might mean a beloved family pet, but a scavenger, one who ate unclean food, an outsider.<sup>2</sup> It is jarring and confusing to hear, but it has something important to teach us about how we are to follow the Way of Jesus.

There's no dodge in these verses about the difficulty of being human, about the ways that we see each other that are limited and hurtful. That kind of hurtfulness and limitation is present even in scripture, today in the words attributed to Jesus. Whether they were in fact his words we don't know, it's unlikely that we have a verbatim account in our Gospels. But it shows how even our sacred texts reflect in some measure the limitations of their time. Now there are some explanations we can offer. Remember that Mark is a war-time Gospel, written during the Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire; a revolt that was brutally repressed and ultimately unsuccessful. So, perhaps it's more understandable why there would be a suspicion of outsiders. But even with that understanding, this text includes prejudice and limitation that is not somehow okay because it is included here.

This passage reflects the central debate among followers of Jesus during the time the New Testament was written from about 2 generations after Jesus to about 6 or 7 generations after Jesus. The big debate was whether you had to be Jewish first in order to follow Jesus, and much of our New Testament was written to take a side in this debate.

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Book of Common Prayer*. Page 855.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock. *The People's New Testament Commentary*. Page 141.

This particular debate is settled now. Almost none of us were Jewish before we became Christian, so unless you used to be Jewish, then your presence here is a testament to change and inclusion in the church. We have a few different narrations of how this came about. In Ephesians, it was the revelation of Christian prophets and early apostles. In Acts it was a gradual revelation of the Holy Spirit to the new church. In Matthew it was the post-resurrection Christ.<sup>3</sup> And in Mark, we see the shift right here in this story. Jesus first calls the Gentiles dogs, but then he seems to take it back, and he moves in love to heal the woman's daughter.

In this story, we can see Jesus' humanity deepen. We can see his ability to expand beyond the boundaries of his group's understanding, his group's limitations, and into something bigger. Something bigger that saw a connection to people on the outside. You know that's the arc of the New Testament – coming to see a connection to people who are not like us; it's the mission of the Church, union with each other and everyone in God; it's the Way, and the Truth, and the Life embodied by Jesus.

Here's how one theologian puts it: "The call of Jesus...is to see that God is the experience of life, love and being who is met at the edges of an expanded humanity."<sup>4</sup>

This can be disorienting. It must have been disorienting for Jesus' disciples. They watched him operate beyond the boundaries that religion and culture had established for their group. These disciples watched Jesus welcome Samaritans, he welcomed women and children. They watched him move towards a Roman centurion in Luke and a Syrophenician woman in Mark. In all of these actions, Jesus seemed to access a power beyond himself and a vision for the world beyond what those of his time knew. He called it time and again the Kingdom of God. And when stories were told about him generations later, this was the theme that his followers remembered: he came to build a new world, to give life, abundant life, beyond the limits that his followers knew.<sup>5</sup>

These boundaries that we're talking about, at their root, they come from fear. And fear is the opposite of love. Fear is the opposite of union.

Now I'm not talking about we might call fear of the Lord, that is perhaps better encapsulated by the word respect. But today I'm talking about the fear that says to us if someone else wins, then we must lose; the fear of things or people that are different. Fear that demands control, that can't contemplate mystery or wonder or ambiguity. That's the kind of fear that shrinks us down, makes it harder to love each other. One priest I respect a great deal says that our primary Christian call is to follow love instead of fear.<sup>6</sup>

And this fear doesn't just stop the flow of love outward from us, but it keeps us from knowing that love ourselves. It keeps us from knowing forgiveness, freedom ourselves. The Kingdom of God isn't a one-way street, it's abundant life for us too.

The call of God is not to build a security system that reduces our fear, but the call of God is to love in spite of our fear. Our call is to see in Jesus the way to be in the world, a way of being that is not dominated by a need to control. Think of Jesus' courage to be – his courage to act from his deepest humanity – without a security system that would have said wait until your group catches up. Instead he acted from his deepest connection to others, his deepest union with God, and the result was a display of ultimate moral power, the result was a portrait of a person so deeply human that he was also divine, a person so compelling that we're still trying to follow

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<sup>3</sup> Boring, Page 141.

<sup>4</sup> John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. Page 290.

<sup>5</sup> Spong, Page 279.

<sup>6</sup> See Ed Bacon, *8 Habits of Love: Open Your Heart, Open Your Mind*.

him 2,000 years later. Now let the power of this person take us to the edge of our humanity and then let it expand that humanity until it is as broad as the Kingdom of God. Let it take us to our deepest union with every person, our deepest union with God.