

Proper 18, Year B – Crumbs under the Table*Mark 7:24-37***Sept. 6, 2009***The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer*

The social worker gestured across a crowded reception area towards a nook hidden from the view of the many people seated in the room, but visible to those of us who were coming from the direction of the courtrooms.

Over there," she said. "In that corner. See?"

I had been a career prosecutor in San Jose, California, but I had literally leapt at an opportunity that came along to take on a new assignment of representing abused and neglected children. I had not had children of my own and my experience of step parenting had not been a particularly happy one. This was another chance to contribute *something* to children. Today I was about to meet a young client, Sally, for the first time – one who had been taken from her father because he had been both neglectful and abusive toward her. Her mother had died in an automobile accident several years before, and the daughter was now living with her father and his girlfriend.

I craned my neck a bit to look around the people who were between me and that nook. Yes, there was someone there. I walked closer – and what I saw was a girl with tousled blond hair, short and slight – so slight, in fact, that the enormous coat wrapped around her backwards – straitjacket style – almost completely engulfed her as she shrank ever farther into the recesses of that nook. She was 12 the report said, but, frankly, the most noticeable physical characteristic about her was that her photo could well have served as an illustration for the dictionary definition of the word "waif."

"Why the coat?" I inquired. "Why the nook?"

"Because," Sally said, "I don't want my father to see me."

"Why not?"

"Because he's always mad at me."

I asked Sally if she could tell me why she had been taken to court.

"Because my dad doesn't take care of me and he hits me all the time."

"Tell me about it."

"He doesn't work much, and, when he's home, he and his girlfriend are almost always in their room smoking pot. Whenever I knock to ask him to do something like get some dinner he gets really mad and hits me."

"How do you eat?"

"I eat lunch at school."

"What about at home?"

"Sometimes I find maybe some cereal."

"Gee, sounds pretty dismal. There must have been *some* good times, too, though. Can you remember when you and your father were happy?"

"Well, I remember when I was about 6 my dad took me to the County Fair and bought me some cotton candy. I liked *that*."

Twelve years old, and the only happy time that Sally could remember with her father was half her life before when he had bought her some cotton candy!

The social worker's report that day said that she weighed 68 lbs. The judge placed her temporarily, until a later hearing, with her deceased mother's brother, who worked in San Jose, but who lived out in the Central Valley, a couple of hours to the east, where houses were less expensive. Two weeks later she returned for that other court hearing. She had obviously been doing a lot of eating. She now weighed 78 lbs.

I spent the last half of my 25-year career as a Deputy District Attorney in Santa Clara County, California, representing children like Sally – children who had been neglected, abused, or molested. I won't pretend to you that I always found it enjoyable, or even that I didn't often find myself lying awake at night worrying about whether we were going to protect or heal the children I represented. I confess I cried from time to time. On more than one occasion I would have liked to have taken a child home with me – perhaps the greatest fallout of my not having children of my own. Of course, there might just have been a boundary issue or two, given the fact that I was divorced within a couple of years of beginning this work. But, even with the obvious panoply of issues in the lives of the hundreds of children I represented over the years, they were *very* easy to love.

Of course, in the case of at least some of their abusers – particularly in cases of sexual molestation – I often heard the abuser speak of how much *he* loved his victim. What is even sadder, I'm sure that some of them believed they really *did* love those children, whereas, of course, in reality it was their *own* needs they were actually concerned about.

Today's Gospel, on the other hand, speaks of a Syrophoenician mother who *truly* loves her daughter. She is the absolute paradigm by which we ought to judge those who care more for the ones who cannot care for themselves rather than those who are actually more absorbed with their own needs. Let's look at the situation in which she finds herself. Her daughter is gravely ill. Rather than to reject her as an annoyance, as clearly was the reaction of Sally's father to a girl who only wanted to be fed and loved, this woman, a member of not only an alien people, Gentiles, but also one considered more enemy than friend – despised even; this

concerned mother continually shouts to Jesus to help her daughter, prompting his disciples to importune him to send her away. How can he have peace with this woman screaming at him? And, he does as they ask, asserting that he was, after all, sent to retrieve the “lost sheep of Israel, not to help Gentiles.”

Since today the vast majority of Christians *are* Gentiles, it should be no surprise that often commentators suggest that this story is meant to be taken not as a rebuke to a Gentile woman but as a demonstration by Jesus to his disciples of how much faith even this Gentile woman can have in him. When he tells her as she kneels before him, begging him to heal her daughter, that “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” it isn’t meant to be taken as a real slight to her, they say, but to give him an opportunity to show the disciples just how great her faith actually is.

Frankly I just don’t buy that way of getting Jesus off the hook. It seems to me far too much like an attempt by later theologians to provide us with an explanation of this story that protects both our own standing as Gentiles and also the aura of perfection that the centuries have bestowed on Jesus. Remember, though! Even if you accept that he is without sin, Jesus is, nevertheless, also fully human. The Bible tells us that when he was a child he grew in wisdom and grace. In that same way, I believe, *this* story shows us that, because of this encounter, he is able to grow in both understanding and compassion as well. The Syrophenician woman recognizes the attitude that Jews have towards her people, but won’t be deterred. “Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,” she says, thereby showing both courage and faith – and a wonderfully quick wit as well. And she gets what she wants from Jesus: because of her faith her daughter is healed.

I’m sure it’s difficult for any of us to imagine that anyone today, let alone a Jesus, could hear of the plight of children like the daughter of this wonderful Syrophenician mother, or, for that matter, like the Sally whom I represented in court, and not be moved to help. Let me encourage you, should you want to volunteer either time or funds to help children and their families, to consider such worthy organizations as the Housatonic Youth Service Bureau, or the YMCA’s Strong Kids campaign, or Children in Placement (Connecticut’s court-appointed Child Advocate program), or, for that matter, our diocesan Bishop’s Fund for Children, all of which do extraordinary work.

But, most important, take from this story, and from others in our Gospels, such as the one in which Jesus admonishes his disciples for not allowing children to come to him, how important it is to care for those not yet capable of caring for themselves – to have *their* needs as a priority rather than our own. After all, Jesus reminds us in that other story about children that it is “to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

IN JESUS’ NAME, *Amen*