



Encounter: Moving from Fear to Abundance



A Sermon By
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An audio version of this sermon is available at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015-09-06-AAA.mp3>

Isaiah 35:4-7a
James 2:1-17
Psalm 146
Mark 7:24-37

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The other day, I was driving through a neighborhood where there were speed cameras. The speed limit was 35 and I slowed down to 30, just to be safe. At that point I noticed a car right on my bumper, tailgating me. I was a little surprised since we were in a speed camera zone and this person was driving so aggressively. As soon as we passed the cameras, this guy swerved past me, blaring his horn and fiercely glaring at me. At that point we reached a stoplight and our cars were stopped parallel to one another. I look over at this guy and with this intense anger on his face he flipped me off. I stared at him in disbelief not thinking that my driving warranted such an irate response. The light changed to green and the man sped off. I internally grumbled for a little bit and then I started making excuses for his behavior. It was rush hour. Maybe he was running late for work. Or maybe he was really stressed. Maybe he was going through a lot in his life and the only way he could work out his feelings in that moment was through his road rage.

I can understand that. I've certainly been on both sides of the situation. I've been the unsuspecting driver surprised by someone else's aggression, and I have to admit, at times, I've been the driver seeing red because of what I deemed as someone's incompetent driving skills. As I reflect back on the times I've experienced road rage, I realize that the root of my anger wasn't really someone else's incompetent driving. At the root of my anger was the idea that I needed something and another person was keeping me from it. I needed to get somewhere fast. I needed to be in the fast lane and someone else was in my space. In those instances, what my road rage boiled down to was that I felt threatened. I felt that there was a scarcity of resources and someone else was threatening my ability to access what I thought I was entitled to. This fear of scarcity is so present in our society today. It manifests itself in different ways, but it is a prevalent piece of our culture.

Fear of scarcity has been a constant threat throughout human history. We even see it in our gospel account today. Jesus, tired and exhausted, seeks solitude. A woman hears about him and asks him to cast a demon out of her daughter. We're informed that this woman is Syrophenician, that is, a Gentile. A Gentile woman asking something of a Jewish teacher would have been uncommon in Jesus' society. And Jesus' response is less than charitable. He dismisses her and insults her, calling her a dog. Jesus seems unsure of the relationship between the Gentiles and the Kingdom of God.

We ought not be surprised at ethnic tension in a text from early Christianity. We also should not be surprised to see problematic gender dynamics emerging from an ancient patriarchal culture. Yet, even given these tensions, Jesus' response feels askew. He essentially refuses to heal this woman's daughter because she is not Jewish. We're not sure why Jesus responded in this way. It seems unlike him. Up until this point in Mark's gospel, we haven't heard or seen Jesus act with

anything but compassion and mercy to those who ask for it. Yet here, Jesus responds in the opposite way.

Maybe he was just off his game. Or perhaps there was more to Jesus' actions. Some biblical scholars argue that at this point in the gospel, Jesus understood his ministry as a ministry only to the Jews to the exclusion of non-Jewish people. That would account for his behavior. Perhaps Jesus felt threatened in some way by this Gentile woman. Maybe Jesus fell subject to the fear of scarcity, like we all do at times. If he was to extend his ministry to the Gentiles by healing this woman's little girl, would that mean less grace for the Jews?

Whatever Jesus' reasons for initially denying the Syrophenician woman's request, he has a change of heart. The woman turns Jesus' insult into a teaching moment. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." This logic resonated with Jesus. "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." By the end of their encounter, Jesus heals the woman's daughter.

I believe that Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman is a turning point for him. Before meeting her, it is fair to say that Jesus understood his ministry to be limited to his fellow Jews. After this encounter, I believe Jesus' understanding of God's mission expanded to include all people.

Encounters can be powerful. They can change us. Mark's Gospel testifies to the utter change enacted through a real encounter with those who are marginalized or excluded. We see this in Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman. We see him move from a place of fearing scarcity to expansive abundance. We see him move from insulting to embracing, from refusing to consenting, and from withholding to healing. We see that even Jesus can learn and change. We see all of that happen because of his encounter with the Syrophenician woman, a person who would have been considered "other."

So my question is, who do we categorize as "other" out of fear or ignorance? Who is it that we feel may pose a threat in some way to our comfort or our ideals? When do we, like Jesus with the Syrophenician woman, separate ourselves to the point that we risk missing out on God's greater call? It happens all the time. It can happen with road rage. It can happen when we see someone different than us. When we marginalize others – be they immigrants, people of color, the LGBTQ community. We see this happening in our society today. Just listen to Donald Trump's comments about Mexicans, or the media's misrepresentation of the Black Lives Matter movement, or Kim Davis the country clerk in Kentucky who refused to grant marriage licenses to gay couples. Sometimes we separate ourselves from other people who we don't understand or we don't want to understand. We put our walls up.

God seeks to tear those walls down. If we, like Jesus, can open ourselves to encounters with those we deem "other," we may be surprised with what God has in store. Our God is a god of abundance not scarcity. We don't need to be afraid or feel threatened by individuals or groups that we aren't familiar with. God is working in all of us to bring about God's reign of abundance. Let's join in this work. Be open to those opportunities when God may be trying to expand your heart. Jesus,

our teacher and Lord, shows us how to do this in his encounter with the Syrophenician woman.
May we follow his example. Amen.