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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 5, 2021
Mark 7:24-37

This week, I read a short article online that really lifted my spirits. The article featured John, a fan of building LEGO sets and of Star Wars, who had recently purchased a hard-to-find and super complicated [Mos Eisley Cantina LEGO set](#). Now, this set had over 3,000 pieces and costs around \$350, if you can find it. The book of instructions runs 400 pages long. So, if you manage to purchase this set, it is clear you are a big fan of both LEGO and Star Wars!

After hours spent working on the set, John realized that he was missing a bag of pieces. I suppose he could have returned the LEGO set to the store, except it's not so easy to return a LEGO set that is two-thirds complete. So, instead John reached out the LEGO customer service via its website.

I don't know about you, but I always dread that moment when I realize that I have to contact customer service. Do I call and wait forever on hold? Even worse still, I might find myself lost in the labyrinth of the automated phone tree. Do I email? If I am lucky enough to get a response, if it usually something automated, or sent by a person whose job it is to respond to hundreds, if not thousands of requests a day. Or do I choose the online "chat" feature? I actually prefer this option because, even though I am usually only interacting with a bot with pre-determined responses, I really hate talking on the phone.

So, no matter which communication vehicle, interacting with customer service often feels stilted and mechanical. The questions and responses are usually predetermined and scripted. The voice – whether spoken or typed – seems robotic. In my experience, the whole exchange usually lacks any sense of shared humanity.

Well, faced with these same options, our LEGO fan chose to send customer service an email. Much to his surprise, he received a response that both was responsive to his problem as well as showed some personality and life. It said this:

Dear John,

Thanks for getting in touch with us and providing that information! I am so sorry that you are missing bag 14 from your Mos Eisley Cantina set! This must be the work of Lord Vader.

Fear not, for I have hired Han to get that bag right out to you. Have a bricktastic day and may the Force be with you :)

This may be the absolute best customer service email response ever! Not only did it apologize for the mistake, and explained how LEGO would make it right, it did it with a sense of personality. I mean, I'm not a big fan of casting blame, but in this case the bit about how it must be the work of Lord Vader was delightful. Whoever wrote the email clearly knows their audience and took the time to make it fun. So accustomed to robotic and transactional exchanges, with this story, we find ourselves surprised and delighted by the humanity expressed.

Our Gospel lesson today is a tricky one. It is a composition of two healing stories that don't seem to have much to do with each other. While both are interesting, I would like to focus this morning on the first one: the story of the Syrophenician woman and the healing of her daughter. Read by itself, this story is jarring – stunning, really. Jesus' rebuke and rejection of this Gentile woman is shocking. It's hard not to recognize the language he uses as anything but outright insulting. But after the

woman gives a clever (and perhaps defiant) retort, Jesus suddenly reverses course and affects the healing miracle anyway. What is going on here?

I think one way to understand this story is to read it as a companion to last week's gospel lesson. Last Sunday, Jesus schooled the Pharisees, upending their sanctimonious purity lines and self-righteous notions of outward signs of piety that ignore the corruption within. Jesus seemed to turn on its head the old notions of who was in and who was out; what was pure and what was defiled. In the end, Jesus called those Pharisees hypocrites – all we who polish the outside of our cups but do not clean the inside. A radical new orientation to love and relationship is defined, for, Jesus says, it is not what goes into our bodies that corrupts us; it is what comes out.

Boom! The mic drops.... and Jesus moves on...directly to this story. Now Jesus is really tired and wants to be left alone. And yet, again the needy, the sick, and the desperate continue to hound him for help and salvation. In this case, it is a Gentile woman, a Syrophenician, whose daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit.

While Jesus attempts to hide away and rest, this woman approaches him and begs him to help her daughter. Here, we expect Jesus to reach across the religious and ethnic boundaries, gaze upon this non-Jewish woman with compassion, and to say, "Have no fear. Your faith has made your daughter well." But instead of this anticipated merciful response, Jesus instead just brusquely dismisses her: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The "children" in this statement do not include her Gentile daughter, but rather the children of Israel. Even more than simple rudeness, his words reinforce ethnic boundaries and degrade the vulnerable woman.

Rather than being cowed by his dismissal, this woman has the audacity (or perhaps merely is desperate enough) to talk back. She argues with Jesus. With remarkable verbal deftness, she turns his words around on him, saying, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." To our surprise, he seems to consider her argument and her persistence and relents. He changes his mind, and replies, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter."

Over the millennia, this story has made many a believer uncomfortable. How could Jesus – the one who is God-In-Man, the one without sin – change his mind? How are we to reconcile this rude man with the Christ of compassion and mercy? Jesus just seems so ordinary_in this story, so much like one of us. Because we much prefer an always-perfect God-man, we are **surprised by his humanity**. We expect immutable divinity and instead we are smacked in the face with what seems like fallible humanity. Right after Jesus accuses the Pharisees of hypocrisy, he is called out by this Gentile woman for his very own.

I imagine Jesus, not as some entitled king regally dismissing this Gentile woman because she is not an Israelite. But rather, I understand this story as God-In-Man Jesus who is really, really tired and just needs a night off. It's been a long and busy couple of weeks and he's exhausted. Then in comes this stranger woman, a Gentile in fact. In his exhaustion, he doesn't really see her but just reacts without thinking, brushing her off rudely. And who among us hasn't been rude and dismissive when tired? That this woman talks back to Jesus itself is shocking and that coupled with the cleverness of her argument seems to wake him up and reveal that he was engaged in exactly the same hypocrisy as the Pharisees.

Some of my favorite Gospel stories are the ones that reveal Jesus' humanity. These are the stories in which he gets tired; he sleeps; he needs a break to pray and refresh. The stories in which he loves and rejoices in the people around him. The stories in which he takes the time to cry and mourn before he resurrects. The stories in which he calls out to God in fear and anguish to remove this cup from him, before accepting and submitting to God's will. For me, the power and the blessing of the incarnation – of Emmanuel, God with us – is that God is with us. With us in our suffering; with us in our physicality; with us in our joy; and with us in our confusion.

We may fear and worship a God who is wholly other than us, but we will love a God who understands our humanity and our complicated mix of contradictions, blurred ethics and motivations, and conflicting emotions. To understand the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Jesus, is to understand God not only as the creator who demands our fidelity and worship, but also that for love deigns to enter the human stage and show us how to be fully human. Our God not only was willing to assume the constraints of mortal, human life, but also the contradictions and, perhaps the hypocrisy, inherent to it. **Simply put: we are surprised by the humanity of Jesus.** And it is this revelation of humanity that can make this story so delightful.

This week, I pray that you experience surprising humanity in your daily interactions. May you also experience the surprising humanity of the living God – a God that shows Godself in irony, humor, and ridiculousness – as well as in majesty, glory, and great love. May your being surprised by humanity transform your transactional encounters into ones that are delightful. May we delight in each other – in our great love, compassion, mercy, and in our fallible humanity. And may we delight in a God that understands our human condition – for that may be the greatest gift of all.

Amen.