

Robbing the Soul

Proverbs 22:1–2, 8–9, 22–23

Mark 7:24–37

Wake Forest Baptist Church

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Back when gasoline hit \$4/gallon, I decided it was time for me to use my bike for more than just the occasional leisurely ride. So, on days when I could dress down for the ride, I'd head out from my house in Town and Country and make my way up Reynolda to Polo and then to campus. The ride itself is rather short, about 20–25 minutes, but heart-poundingly exciting; if you think Reynolda is a heavily travelled road, try riding a bike at any time of day and you'll be much more impressed by how many cars are out there. I think it was Mark Twain who said: "Learn to ride a bicycle. You will not regret it if you live."

It would seem that people in cars should recognize that with the difference in size and weight, steering clear of bicyclists would be wise, not to mention humane. But just the opposite is the case. For some drivers, seeing someone on a bike must stimulate a competitive mean streak as they see how close they can get to you without actually hitting you, although, tragically, sometimes they do. Some of you may remember the story of Bruce Hermann who was hit from behind by a car about six months ago and nearly died as a result. The driver was not charged with any offense. I have been fortunate to not have any seriously close calls, but I take the precaution of wearing a special ID bracelet with links to medical information, just in case someone fails to miss me.

Drivers often seem to go into road rage when they see a bicyclist, imagining that we are deliberately trying to slow them down and complicate their day. And I must admit that I used to be one of those drivers until I started riding on highways and recognized how dangerous the situation could become. Being the one targeted changed my mind and caused me to be more careful of bicyclists when I was the one behind the wheel.

But even given my personal experiences, there are still days when I'm in a hurry to get to a meeting, or deep in thought about a problem, that I come upon bikers in the roadway and can't help but feel a twinge of resentment. Even though I know, all too well, what it means to be on the other side of that situation, some deeper part of my psyche pulls up old feelings that I have to push back intentionally.

When I was much younger, another of those unwelcome thoughts concerned a much more sinister fear, a fear of young African American men. My parents had taught me to be afraid, and even though I went out of my way to scrub my mind of such racist conditioning, there were still times when that old fear – that old prejudice – would wind its way back into my reality, even as I had tried to stamp it out. No doubt many of you deal with such unbidden thoughts as a result of your life experiences.

I thought about how my own deep-seated fears/prejudices have found their way to the surface unsolicited as I re-read our gospel story of Jesus' exchange with the Syro-Phoenecian woman. There have been myriad apologetic commentaries about Jesus' initial, harsh, response to this woman. Many readers try to find a way to smooth Jesus' speech, suggesting that his characterizing the woman and her people – Gentiles – as “dogs “ was not really so bad, or, that he was simply noting that his mission was first to Israel, and then to the “others,” to Gentiles. I find these attempts to mitigate his speech to be pretty weak; his statement was sharp, and harsh.

In some readings, Jesus' harshness is said to be due to the fact that she was an unattached woman, coming to him without warning. But another woman had already touched Jesus and been healed, without incident. Others argue that her Gentile ethnicity was the problem, yet it was only a little earlier in this gospel that Jesus healed the Gerasene demoniac, so her ethnicity does not seem to have been the primary reason for his response. But there's another way of reading this story. The region of Tyre was a well-known commercial center. It would have been dependent for foodstuffs from outlying agricultural areas, and with its power in the region, would have been able to exploit those working the land, taking more than their fair share of the goods produced, if they chose to do so. It is unlikely that the region had a very large Jewish population, and those who did reside there were probably members of the lower class, persons whose work output might have been among those exploited by the Gentile leaders of the area.

Jesus had come to Tyre apparently looking for rest. He was trying to hide out in an area where large Jewish crowds would not find him, perhaps staying with friends who had told him of their victimization by an economic system that taxed their resources unfairly, injustice that would have rightly angered Jesus. Imagine, then, that into this picture comes a woman from the ruling class, a Gentile whose people were exploiting the work of Jews, asking Jesus for help. Knowing the treatment of his people, why should we be surprised that Jesus' anger towards such exploitation bubbles to the surface? He wants justice for those treated unjustly, and now a person of privilege, who may have benefitted from the economic injustice, comes asking him for help.

She is obviously bright, as she takes Jesus' sharp reply to her request and turns it on him, a move that no doubt left Jesus chastened, so much so that he ends up honoring her request, telling her that because of what she *said* to him, her daughter had been healed.

Jesus was willing to hear her argument, recognize that his initial response had not been the best, and then give her what she is seeking. Her tenacity and truthfulness yields healing, and not just for her possessed daughter, but for Jesus as well.

Being pulled into another's life can go a long way to help us modify our thinking about a great many things. Jesus listened to someone he may have assumed was complicit in injustice, realized his initial response was not the right one, and his healing was one result.

If, however, it is our desire to always protect our way of thinking about a situation or a person, the last thing we want to do is listen to the arguments of others, lest we be changed. Unfortunately, it seems that discussions about health care reform have become an area where people really don't want to hear views that contradict their own.

I spent a lot of hours this week reading material about the health care debate, and covered a wide variety of viewpoints in an effort to try and educate myself on the issue. There are many absurdities being put forth. We've all heard of the so-called "death panels," a notion understood to be false by all but the most rabid partisans. We've experienced the irony of arguments by some senior citizens who don't want "the government" involved in their health care, but don't think about touching the Medicare coverage they have through that very same government! Comedians have been joking about the fights at the town hall meetings, noting that more of them would have led to physical violence except that people were afraid if they did get hurt they'd go bankrupt over uncovered medical expenses.

I've heard from a number of you about fears related to coverage for health care. Some of you who lost jobs recognized very quickly that without employer coverage, making COBRA payments would have bankrupted the household, an all too common occurrence. Others have recognized that there is already rationing in our system, that so-called experts are already making decisions about whether or not to allow coverage in various areas, regardless of how faithfully premium payments are made.

One of the most interesting articles I read was by David Goldhill in the Atlantic (<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200909/health-care>). Goldhill, a business executive for whom health care reform became very personal following the death of his father, takes on the whole notion of the possibility of reform, arguing instead that the current system is so broken it needs to be completely overhauled.

I think Goldhill makes some valid points, and I would highly recommend reading his article, but there is not time this morning to unpack all the issues surrounding health care reform, although I'll be suggesting in an upcoming newsletter article that we, as a congregation and community, need to be better educating ourselves on the subject. Instead, I'm asking us to be willing to face some hard questions about what is underlying our particular responses to contentions issues like health care reform.

In our reading from Proverbs, we find one of the many passages in Hebrew scripture that address our need to take care of the poor:

"The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all...Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them."

I don't know about you, but "despoil" is not a word I use very often. The Hebrew word translated as despoil, *qaba* (kaw-bah'), also means "to rob" so the verse could also read that God pleads the cause of the poor and robs of life those who rob the poor. But the

meaning is even stronger when we consider that the Hebrew word for life, *nephesh*, is so rich in meaning. It is the completeness of one's being, and is often translated as "soul" God pleads the cause of the poor and robs the souls of those who rob the poor. Said another way, we all lose our souls when the lives of the poor are robbed through our refusal to help them, through our refusal to recognize that all people are God's people.

Robbing the souls of the poor is in evidence when the first question asked by opponents of protection of the least of these is: how will this affect me? Will I lose anything? Will I be asked to sacrifice for others whose lives I find to be less worthy? Will I be inconvenienced in any way?

Jesus' example with the Gentile woman shows that we cannot allow our experiences with some people to color our expectations of all people. We cannot make sweeping judgments about everyone in a particular religious group, ethnic group, socio-economic group, etc. We must listen to what others have to say, and be willing to admit that the way we see things is not always the ONLY way an issue may be viewed.

Listening is the key to transformation. If we can hear what others have to say on health care or any other issue about which we feel strongly, then we have shown that we respect others as God's children, too. If we desire only to shut down conversation and keep things the way we want them, then we are quickly on the road to robbing the souls of others, and losing our own souls in the process.

As our church's transition process continues, there will still be many opportunities for us to share with each other from our life experiences, expressing our hopes for the future. Each of us will bring to these times of sharing our own very important thoughts. And we must be careful that our responses to each other remain gentle. We may all have very clear ideas about what we'd like to see for the future of this congregation, but no one of us has the only blueprint, and ultimately, we are called to be open to God's leading, and not to our own.

Jesus had a very clear idea about the future of God's ministry to the world, and about the rightness of the task ahead of him, and even he had to recognize that other voices and needs had to be considered.

In a few moments, we will be coming forward to share at this table. As the Gentile woman reminded Jesus, all of God's children deserve the bread of life. So whether you are a member of this or any congregation, you are invited to this table, to tear bread and dip it in the cup.

For Jesus, when he invited his disciples to the table, took bread and blessed it and broke it saying, "This is my body, which is for you." Likewise, he took the cup, and after blessing it gave it to them saying "This is the blood of the new covenant, poured out for all."

If you are unable to come forward, we have someone who will be glad to serve you where you are seated. Otherwise, I invite you now to come forward and join in the feast.