

Demons, Dogs, and Peacemaking

by Thomas Boomershine

Thomas Boomershine is professor of New Testament at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. After graduation from Earlham, he studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York and was a minister and community organizer in inner-city churches in the ghettos of New York and Chicago. He is the founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers and co-chairman of the Society of Biblical Literature's research group on the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media. This essay is based on a sermon given at Earlham All-College Meeting on Homecoming weekend in October.

When I began college in 1958, Dwight David Eisenhower was president. In his closing address to the nation, Eisenhower warned of the growing power of the military industrial complex and its inexorable drive to manufacture more arms. It is amusing to imagine what Eisenhower would say about Reagan.

In 1958, ICBMs were only beginning to be deployed. In the intervening thirty years the major governments of the world, led by the United States, have armed themselves for nuclear war. The interests of the military industrial complex now virtually determine the national budget. We worship God today under the shadow of the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. Those words, nuclear holocaust, have become almost a cliché. But the fact is that human beings, for the first time in the history of human civilization, have the power to destroy the world. We must learn how to live in peace. But what is the nature of the forces that can bring peace?

I invite you to reflect on the story of the encounter between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman in the Gospel of Mark. A central presupposition of the Christian religion is that the character of God's government of the cosmos was made clear in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He was sent by God as the Redeemer of the world; thus, the title Messiah in Hebrew, in Greek, Christ.

The primary source for knowledge about Jesus as Christ is the collection of narratives in the New Testament known as the Gospels. In the search for understanding and cooperation in the ways of God that lead to peace and salvation for humanity, intensive reflection on the stories of the Gospels is a wise and reasonable thing to do. And the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman is a paradigmatic instance of peacemaking:

"And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house, and wanted no one to know it. Yet he could not be hid.

"But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

"And he said to her, 'let the children first be fed. For it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Yes, lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

"And he said to her, 'For this saying you may go your way. The demon has left your daughter.' And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone." (Mark 7:24-30)

Jesus' trip to the region of Tyre and Sidon was a trip into enemy territory. His route was approximately the same as that of the Israeli army in the invasion of Lebanon that led to the expulsion of the PLO and the massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps. The trip involved crossing boundaries. Recent anthropological research has focused on boundaries as a definition of human communities. There are many types of boundaries. There are boundaries of space: geographical boundaries such as mountains and rivers, borders between nations, property lines, and room divisions in a house. A current expression of boundaries is: "Stay out of my space."

There are boundaries around food: different eating places for various racial groups and for social and economic classes. In 1958, there were still laws in this country that enforced boundaries between where blacks and whites would eat, ride the bus, and swim. There are boundaries around sex: in the colleges of 1958, there were separate dorms for women and men. Men were not allowed into women's dorms except on strictly limited and supervised occasions. The boundaries have changed now. But I would be willing to bet there are still boundaries between men and women in the coed dorms of contemporary colleges.

Thus, in going to Tyre and Sidon, Jesus crossed the boundaries that divided his people, the Jews, from their enemies, the Gentiles.

A woman recognized what he had done and asked him to help her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Demons in the ancient world were agents of corporate powers of evil. In the New Testament world view, the powers of evil afflict and oppress everyone, allies and enemies alike. Demons are the personalized form of those cosmic principalities and powers. The woman was clearly desperate for some power that would set her daughter free.

But in asking for Jesus' help, this woman was also crossing many boundaries. In the story, the scandal of her request is highlighted by the narrator's description of her identity: she was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth.

The Hellenists, and especially the Syrians, were the most bitter enemies of Israel in this period. In 169 B.C.E., under Antiochus Epiphanies IV, many Jews were killed for refusing to eat pork; others were punished for having scrolls of the Scriptures. In our contemporary idealization of Greek culture, we often forget that the dominant religion of Greece was the worship of Zeus. A ritual action in the worship of Zeus was the sacrifice of a pig. As part of Antiochus' reform, he sacrificed a pig on the high altar of the Temple in Jerusalem. In the tradition of Israel this was known as "the abomination of desolation." This ritual action was one of the ways by which the Greeks hoped to make Jews more sophisticated and open-minded to other religions.

On another occasion during this campaign, as reported in II Maccabees 7, Antiochus publicly tortured to death a family of seven brothers, one by one, and finally their mother. In view of what the Syrians had done to the Jews, therefore, this Syro-Phoenician woman's request on behalf of her daughter was a bold crossing of the boundaries of propriety. Generally, such requests are made out of either ignorance or arrogance.

Jesus puts her to a tough-minded test. His statement is a racial insult: "It is not right to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs." He was not talking about Lassie, or Benji, or that memorable canine with whom all Boomershines are linked, Boomer. He was talking about wild dogs that ran in packs and attacked people mercilessly, like the bands of dogs that now roam the South Bronx. They were among the most hated animals in Israel. Jesus' rhetoric is right out of the '60s when police officers were "pigs." In the context of the politics of Israel in Jesus' day, Syro-Phoenicians were hated "dogs."

Jesus of Nazareth was not a naive peacemaker who lived in a dream world as we wish the world would be. The problem with so many peace programs is this childlike innocence and lack of tough-minded dealing with the realities of the world. This charge is the affliction of pacifists of all ages. But naive wishful thinking is not characteristic of Jesus of Nazareth. He puts the woman to a demanding spiritual test.

Her response is a total surprise in the context of the political relationships of her age. She accepts the justice of Jesus' characterization of her nation and its policies. But, she also persists in her request for his help against the powers of evil: "Yes, lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off the children's table." Her statement indicates her willingness to accept political responsibility for the crimes of her people as the context of her request. In a spirit of determined humility, she crosses the boundaries that separate her from her enemies in order to get help for her daughter.

Jesus' response was immediate and revolutionary. He looked at her, saw her sincerity, probably smiled, and granted her request. "For this saying, go, the demon has left your daughter." He delivers the daughter of his enemy from subjection to the powers of evil. Just as the symbol of racial and national hatred of enemies from Germany to Cambodia to Lebanon is the mass murder of innocent children, so also is saving the life of an enemy's child the symbol of reconciliation and love between enemies. A scene from the film *Gandhi* is etched in my memory when a Hindu father confessed to Gandhi that, in outrage at Moslem attacks on Hindus, he had smashed the head of a Moslem child against a post. Gandhi responded by telling him to adopt a Moslem child as his own.

The power of this action is seen in the rest of Jesus' life. Historical scholarship suggests that the central event that led to Jesus' death was his demonstration in the Temple. The picture of this event in Mark is that Jesus entered the Court of the Gentiles and attacked those of his own nation who had turned it into a marketplace rather than a place of prayer for Israel's enemies, the Gentiles. His action was a prophetic act in defense of a place of prayer shared with enemies, a place for potential reconciliation between enemies. He fought against a combination of political, economic, and religious interests that had perverted the true spirit of the religion of Israel. In this sense, Jesus died for his enemies.

This story reveals a pattern of action for the establishment of a government of justice and peace in the world. It is, first of all, a willingness to cross the boundaries that separate us from our enemies. Whenever we cross the boundaries between enemies, we contribute to peace.

Let me name some of them: the boundaries between the United States and our enemy in World War II, the Japanese; the boundaries between the descendants of African slaves in the U.S. and the descendants of those who bought and sold them and destroyed their family

structures; the boundaries between the majority of humanity that lives in poverty, on the verge of starvation, and the rich minority that benefits economically from the majority's plight; the boundaries between those nations who have found that a communist revolution is a way to liberation from feudalism and those nations who earlier found that a capitalist/bourgeois revolution accomplished the same purpose; the boundaries between political dictatorships and democracies.

At the heart of the spiritual gift of a liberal arts education is the opportunity and encouragement to cross the boundaries that divide enemies. When students study and learn about their enemies, they participate in the purpose of God made clear in this story.

When we know the stories of our enemies, can feel in our bones what they feel, we take steps towards being agents of reconciliation and peace. When there is that will to break out of the limits imposed on each person by the accidents of birth, peace becomes possible. We need, therefore, to identify and celebrate actions of creative and constructive boundary crossing between enemies. And many such actions are being taken by persons in the intellectual communities of science, literature, and the arts as well as in the worlds of diplomacy, economics, and religion.

But with the strengths of the intellectual community also comes its greatest danger. It is the danger of a kind of vague sophistication and universalized intellectualism in which all distinctions between different political systems and religions are merged into a somewhat detached and idealistic group. In the very search for reaching out across boundaries, there is the danger of superficial reconciliation that does not penetrate to the depth of the dividing lines of hostility. We can easily be satisfied with the semblance rather than the reality of peace. Having done some laudable boundary crossing in earlier periods, the intellectual community is in danger of easily withdrawing into comfortable living within the existing boundaries of our culture.

The fact is that now more than ever we are called to cross the deepest and most pervasive boundaries that separate human communities. In relation to the boundaries that exist between nations and economic systems, we need to learn sympathetically about the people who live on both sides of those walls of hostility. We do not adequately understand either the socialist economies or the political systems of our enemies, especially the Soviet Union. There is far too little person-to-person contact with our enemies. The study of Russian has declined in American colleges and universities. There are relatively few foreign study programs for American students in the Soviet Union. In the context of this analysis, Earlham's Japanese program is a symbol of crossing boundaries with those who have been and, in some sense still are, our enemies. But we need extensive programs of international study and research in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba.

Another critical boundary that is often ignored is the boundary between the religions of the world. The Iranian revolution and the resurgence of Islam is only the most recent sign of this boundary. When the people of America are steadily called "the great Satan," it is reasonable to conclude that some hostility is involved. But we in this country have an abysmally poor understanding of Islam. Unless we, as a country identified as a Christian nation by Moslems, understand Islam from the inside, we cannot understand or respond appropriately to the conflicts that develop between us. We need to know the stories and the theology of Islam. But, for some reason, we as Americans are very reticent to study and

understand other religions. We tend either to become adherents of a religion or to reject it. That is one of the boundaries Jesus crossed in doing good for this Syro-Phoenician woman.

The Jesus story clarifies a strategy for peacemaking. The strategy is to deal with the demons and the dogs. Peacemaking involves recognizing the mutual subjection of human beings to the powers of evil resident in the results of the massive wrongs that human groups have done to each other in the past. Everyone deals with demons. Crossing the boundaries is a willingness to share the battle against the corporate powers of evil with our enemies. Peacemaking also involves the tough-minded testing of the real world, the willingness to call a dog a dog until there is a clear willingness to relate in a new way. But when that willingness is present, peacemaking means loving, really loving, our enemies.

This story invites every human being to ask these questions: In what ways can I reach out across the dividing walls of hostility that separate me from my enemies? In what ways are our enemies asking for our help for their children who are oppressed by demonic powers beyond their control? What are the hard realities that must be confronted and confessed before true reconciliation and peace will be possible?

Karl Popper has written that the history of human civilization has been made from the top down with one exception: the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who have made history from the bottom up. The way in which Jesus' followers have made history from the bottom up is to give the gifts of the Kingdom of God to their enemies just as Jesus did in his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. And there are two primary means for these gifts: words and actions. The actions are deeds of loving kindness and mercy: food, clothes, knowledge, money. The words are the stories, songs, languages, and traditions of our communities.

My own reflection on this story with its implicit questions and gifts has led to an interesting and hopeful venture. When I was a student at Earlham, I became fascinated with Russian literature and the history of the people of the Soviet Union. I studied Russian and planned to do graduate work in comparative literature. 1988 is the millennial anniversary of the establishment of Christianity in Russia. As a part of that celebration, the Network of Biblical Storytellers, an organization that has grown out of my research on the storytelling origins of the Gospels, is going to take a storytelling trip to the Soviet Union. Our hope is to begin to establish storytelling connections between persons, families, congregations, and scholarly guilds within the Soviet Union and in the United States. We will seek to make history from the bottom up. In the context of the nuclear arms race, such a trip seems almost idiotic. From the perspective of this story, it makes perfect sense. Time will tell.

The good news inherent in this story is the power of the tough-minded love of God to bring about peace. In Jesus Christ, God has both shown us the way to peace and has acted decisively to bring it about. We can undertake our missions of boundary crossing, therefore, in confidence and hope. In particular, we can open ourselves to learn more deeply, to share more aggressively, and to tell stories more frequently with our enemies.