

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 18  
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
September 5, 2021  
Isaiah 35:4-7a,  
Psalm 146  
James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17  
Mark 7:24-37

## Purple and Outsiders

What's your favorite color? Did you have a different favorite color as a child? Did you have more than one?

My favorite color was purple. I liked it from an early age. I have a February birthday, so some members of my family have mused that I like purple because amethyst is my birthstone.

I loved the story of Lydia of Thyatira, a seller of purple, in the book of Acts. It's just cool that the first European convert to the Jesus movement was a woman who was both successful in business and became a pastor.

Somewhere along in those young years I learned that purple was a color associated with royalty because purple dye and purple fabrics were so expensive.

It wasn't until much later that I learned that purple has been such a contested color over many generations and associated with LGBTQ+ people for centuries.

In seminary, I had friends who would never wear purple because they thought it would signal that they were gay.

Since becoming an Episcopalian, I have known clergy colleagues who avoid wearing purple so as to avoid speculation that they have aspirations of becoming bishops.

So, why all the emphasis on purple? Because today Jesus leaves his home country, his home region, and his home culture for the first time. And he goes to the city where purple was invented, the city of Tyre.

Located in modern Lebanon, Tyre is the place where, beginning fourteen centuries before Jesus' lifetime, the most expensive dye in the world was produced.

More than 9,000 murex shellfish and a whole lot of labor were needed to create just one gram of Tyrian purple. From these thousands of crushed shellfish, a liquid emerged that was used to dye cloth in colors ranging from crimson to a deep bluish-purple. By 301 CE, the price for one pound of purple dye was 150,000 denarii, the equivalent of the value of about three pounds of gold. That would be about \$60,000 a pound in today's money.

By the first century, purple dye was produced in a few other places, including the city of Thyatira in modern Turkey, Lydia's hometown.

The city of Tyre is on the coast. It is about 34.5 miles northwest of Capernaum, a village on the shore of the inland Sea of Galilee where we have found Jesus more than once. Tyre is located in a territory known in the first century as Syria-Phoenicia. Phoenicia, by the way, comes from the Greek word for purple.

And in this city where a very rare dye was produced, a truly extraordinary encounter takes place.

“Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre,” Mark's gospel says. Apparently, he makes this journey as a solo traveler. He enters someone's home. Whose home? There were some Jews living in Syria-Phoenicia at that time. Did he have a distant relative or other connection there?

He doesn't want anyone to know he is there. Why is he there?

The text doesn't give us answers to these questions. It does, however, give us another instance of how the gospel of Mark uses geography to present the gospel, the good news of God in Christ, and to make significant points.

Whatever his reason for going, Jesus has crossed boundaries very intentionally from his home region, a place populated almost entirely by people of his same religious, racial, and ethnic group, and traveled to Tyre, the capital city of the province of Syria-Phoenicia.

In last week's gospel Jesus declared that what defiles people is the things that come out of people, the fruits of bad intentions—not the things that go into people.

Today he himself lives into that reality by going into regions of Gentile people. For an observant Jew, every single one of these Gentile persons he encounters, whether he talks with them or passes them on the road or buys food from them or whatever, every single one of them is mostly to be avoided from the point of view of the Mosaic law.

He doesn't want anyone to know he is there in Tyre in that house. But word spreads quickly. Immediately—there's that Markan word again—a woman who has a sick child hears that he is there, and she comes and bows down at his feet. Is he sharing space with her in a Gentile home or a Jewish home? In any case, he is sharing space with a person who is both a Gentile and a woman.

The woman is unnamed. But we do know she was a native of this region. She comes into a house where Jesus is a guest but a foreigner in her home territory. In this geographic location, she is an insider, and he is an outsider.

She asks him to cast out the demon that torments her daughter.

In words all the more daring given his location, Jesus replies, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Wow.

Is he calling this woman and her child dogs? Is he calling all Gentiles dogs? Is he dismissing her? Is he picking a fight with her? Is he inviting her into a conversation in a way that seems strangely adversarial? Is he quoting a proverb to see how she will react?

Whatever he is doing, she emerges as a worthy interlocutor. Her response, “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” He tells her she may go home to find her daughter well. And she does.

Some have said that Jesus loses an argument in this story. Others have said that Jesus’ own heart is converted in this encounter. Definitely, he changes course as a result of it.

Before this encounter, at least in Mark’s gospel, Jesus has made clear that he is sent from God to the people of Israel. His target audience has been clear, and it has not included Gentiles.

After this encounter, Jesus goes on from Tyre, not back into Israel but to Sidon, which is another 24.5 miles farther north on the coast of Syria-Phoenicia—even further away from his home region, home country, and home culture.

And after visiting Sidon, he still doesn’t go back to his home region of Galilee. Instead, he goes pretty far east and way far south from Sidon, across the Jordan River and into the region of the Decapolis, the ten-city league—also Gentile territory.

When he comes into that region, where he is also a foreigner, an outsider, people again recognize him as a healer. Some people bring a man who cannot hear and who cannot speak clearly and beg Jesus to lay a healing hand on him.

Jesus takes the man away from the crowd. They have a one-on-one consultation. The man’s dignity is respected.

This healing is very tactile and intimate. Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears. He spits and touches the man’s tongue. The man’s ears are opened, and his tongue is loosed. He can hear well and speak plainly. Jesus tells the man and his friends to keep quiet, but they can’t help themselves.

As we have seen before in Mark, Jesus is not afraid of difficulties or desperation or dirt. Now we also see that he is not afraid of gender, ethnic, racial, or religious differences either. He meets people where they are. He addresses the needs before him. As Isaiah describes, in his

presence, the ears of the deaf are unstopped. As the reading from the epistle of James instructs, he doesn't make distinctions among persons. He is not hung up on what is on the outside of someone. He cares about the entire person and respects the dignity of every human being.

Following the extraordinary encounter with the woman of Syria Phoenicia, in this change of plan, in this transformation of heart and mind, Jesus the Christ, our model in all things, shows us the power of having a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset.

From within a fixed mindset, our imaginations are limited. From within a fixed mindset, we will go to great lengths to avoid situations that reveal any place where we may not be seen as smart or competent or having it all together. From within a fixed mindset, we spend a lot of energy comparing ourselves to everyone else and not so much just being ourselves. From within a fixed mindset, one small setback, one unpleasant encounter can cause us to abandon something altogether, even something very important to us.

A fixed mindset leads us to say things like, "We've always done it this way" and "We've never done it that way before" and "We tried that once, and it didn't work."

A growth mindset, on the other hand, allows us to view problems and perplexities as opportunities and challenges. From within a growth mindset, we risk trying new things; we are open to learning, and we learn; we don't worry so much about what everyone else is doing; we gain insight from setbacks, mistakes, and errors that allow us to continue to modify and modulate and move forward in fulfilling our mission and remaining faithful to our core beliefs and values.

We might say that a fixed mindset is in a way a kind of prison, and a growth mindset is a means of liberation.

We might say that a fixed mindset keeps us trapped inside a box that may no longer serve, and a growth mindset facilitates outside-the-box strategies and tactics.

As a result of his encounter with the unnamed woman of Syria Phoenicia Jesus does not abandon his mission: he expands it. And he takes up different approaches that he perhaps had not even considered before. He crosses literal and metaphorical boundaries and deploys his same healing and teaching ministries in new contexts—contexts he had not previously imagined. Increasingly, his approach becomes future-oriented and outward-facing.

This is the call that rings true for us today. What are we invited to learn, to try, to risk, to respond to God's call? What boundaries, including perceived ones which are real in their consequences, is the Holy Spirit inviting us to cross as St Paul's, Key West as we become increasingly a congregation, a community that is future-oriented and outward-facing? Let's find out together.