Sermon on Proper 23
(Proverbs 22, James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-35)

We are complicated beings that’s for sure. I was reminded of that in so many ways during the 3 week Basic skills in clinical counselling course I just took on my study leave.

The skills we were learning, taken together, highlighted the fact that in every interaction who we are is the catalyst: it’s what we say, and *how* we say it; to go a layer deeper; it’s the quality of our empathy and compassion; that difficult art of putting ourselves in another person’s shoes, attempting to hear through their ears and see through their eyes; all of that, admittedly, very partially.

And underneath that layer is the mysterious, very hard to quantify or describe, spiritual presence of each person, there of course in different ways but always providing the depth dimension.

All of this happens in every encounter we have with each other, whether we bring it to conscious awareness or not. What I found exhausting in the course was trying to have those areas *in* conscious awareness more often than I would in a normal conversation.

Reading the scriptures for this week in light of my experiences over the past few weeks I was reminded of a great line from the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead* by the American author Marilynne Robinson.

At one point the main character, a Pastor named John Ames says “we are artists of our behaviour!”

I’ve never read a line that more succinctly captures the dynamic freedom that is at the heart of being a human being; that is at the heart of what it means to live into the abundant life Jesus proclaims and demonstrates.

When I first read that line many years ago, I understood it, and still do, to mean that we are artists not just of how we move and act but of our very thoughts and attitudes, even of our emotions and I determined to say some version of it in every sermon I preached though I would rarely use the exact words themselves.

“We are artists of our behaviour” is the necessary corrective to a “follow the rules,” moralistic understandings of what “being a Christian” means.

We use the line “followers of Jesus” and it can conjure following rigidly in the footsteps of another; almost unthinkingly: “don’t stray off the path!” said with concern, with fear even.

It is the necessary corrective to an understanding of belief that becomes unhinged from action; as if having some abstract “belief system” about God, about heaven is what we mean by faith rather than, as our first two readings assume, faith as a grounding for our interactions with others!

Maybe most importantly, “We are artists of our behaviour” is a necessary corrective to narrow judgmental understanding of God; as John Ames goes on to explain, “the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense…. it suggests how God might actually enjoy us.  I believe we think about that far too little.”

In others words, God made us complex and yet free and delights in the adventure of our self-discovery, in the adventure of crafting our behaviour over time to be in line with loving justice. God is not sternly watching over us but joyfully and lovingly interacting with us on the way!

To push this metaphor a bit, we can imagine that the script of the play set before us is one in which we don’t know the ending but we have hints and foreshadowings of where the story is going in the story of Israel and supremely in Jesus Christ.

Our role is to artfully enter the drama interpreting each encounter we have with each other, with those in our life, whether at work, family or play so that the arc of the universe bends evermore so slightly towards loving justice for all.

Using the metaphor of a drama is so helpful because, as we know, a synonym for a drama is “a play;” to become an artist we need to cultivate a sense of experiment, of play, of trying things on, and—boy this tough—not beating ourselves up too severely when we mess up but simply saying, “okay, I’ve got some more to learn;

I’ve got some discrimination to overcome, some lack of generosity to get over etc; or in my case, as became clear as the course went along, more anxiety to acknowledge and pray into, whether anxiety about my relationships or about the future; without awareness, anxiety has a way of permeating everything!

How does “we are artists of our behaviour” relate to our scripture readings today? Well, for one thing, we’re reminded of the basic plot or script when we read in Proverbs “God is the creator of both the rich and the poor” or “we shouldn’t despoil the poor with our selfishness.”

It may help us a bit more, moving from the stark proverbs to James’ beautiful exhortation of God’s heart for everyone to be reminded of God’s fundamental desire that our actions match what we say we believe, particularly when we encounter people with less than we have been given.

The reading from James is like a director’s cue, important for sure, but I find, I need to see it lived out; what I really need is an acting coach who will help me interact with the world and other people the way my classmates and professors helped me dive into the adventure of learning clinical counselling skills.

This, I would say, is what we get with Jesus in our story today, a justly famous one in which Jesus seems surprised and even defensive when confronted by the request of the Syrophoenician woman whose daughter is in a desperate way.

I love the Jesus of this text because he’s “an artist of his behaviour.” He’s caught, as we all are in the dilemmas of existence; he knows that the Jewish hope is the world’s hope and yet he also knows it’s not yet that time.

But here, in this awkward predicament he has to improvise, he has to learn what loving justice requires in *this* encounter, not in some theory, not in some set of “maybes!”

From that perspective I see Jesus artfully coming to understand his role in a new way and drawing the woman into her new role and I see the woman artfully, powerfully coming to understand her role in a new way and drawing Jesus into his new role.

There is great potential for awful things to happen when one person has more power, more money or more influence than the other.

But here, where there is such an imbalance, it doesn’t end in oppression, in abuse, in a #metoo moment, but in healing. Both of the actors know the script; both know that the moral arc of history is long but that in the end it bends towards God’s loving justice

But that’s not enough, this script orients them but they need each other in order for God’s Loving Justice, God’s mercy to be enacted.

One of the skills we practiced in my class was something called a challenge for insight. Once you’ve established a relationship with someone you can, for the sake of healing, probe an emotional wound in order to help a person confront a deep fear or anxiety.

Something like this seems to be going on here because when Jesus says “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” which sounds harsh to our ears, this woman takes as a challenge and then, using great courage, asserts herself as one of God’s own precious children and says, “I too deserve grace and mercy, forgiveness and healing!”

I experienced this, on a much smaller scale the other day when, just after reading this story, I needed to tell a homeless person that he couldn’t sleep in the alcove right beside where all the children enter the Daycare doors at St. Matthew.

I said, early in the morning, feeling bad, feeling a bit defensive, “Excuse me sir, but you’ll need to leave, the children are coming in.” “Oh,” he said, responding as he came out of a deep sleep after a night on cold outdoor concrete, “thanks for telling me sir; I’ll move out in a minute.”

In his polite response he confronted me with his humanness, his right to shelter and I determined that the next time I talked to him I’d have a coffee and food in hand.

Through my small encounter with him God opened my ears a little wider to the truth of his condition, to the need I have, not to be better than him, but to risk myself as his equal so that next time, when I encounter him, I don’t act out of some predetermined rule, or just like I did the last time, but in the freedom.

Where do you encounter people in your daily life where the temptation may be to think of them as inferior? Do you dread, seek to avoid these encounters? Or might they be opportunities for you to exercise your freedom as an artist in the great drama of God?

If the latter, like Jesus, you’ll be changed by the encounter, you’ll learn, you’ll grow, you’ll suffer more emotionally but you’ll be more alive, more human and that’s, well that’s everything!