

You probably all know that Victor Central School is often ranked in the top 100 public school districts in the United States. I believe one or two schools on Long Island outrank it in New York State, but otherwise it is the best public education New York State has to offer. It is something Victor has every right to be proud of. Now, you've probably heard me level some well-aimed criticism at Victor schools. Some of it is well deserved, and some of it is just jealousy coming from a resident of Canandaigua. Thirteen years ago when I moved here Canandaigua was considered to have the better school.

There is something about Victor schools that I am the most proud of however; but I doubt many people would agree. That is Hunt's Trailer Park. To put it crudely, I've heard Hunt's described as the "armpit" of the Victor school district. It has mostly old and run down mobile homes and it fits just about every bad stereotype about mobile home parks. Many of you may have never driven through it, and may not even know how to find it. The access isn't exactly obvious though bits of the park can be seen from the Canandaigua Thru-Way exit.

What I like about Hunt's so much is that it allows someone who does not have a lot of money to gain access to the excellent education the Victor schools have to offer. You don't have to have a lot of money to get into Victor.

Jesus said you will always have the poor with you, and he was right. An interesting thing starts to happen when wealth and power begin to concentrate. The poor get pushed out. Look at home prices in this area for example. Houses command a high price. That is in part because they are larger and more elaborate than average, and of course, in part because of "location, location, location".

Residents see their home values rise because other people want to live here. Realtor's tell me Victor schools is the number one selling point for a home in this area. That's good news if you're a home owner. But it inadvertently begins to exclude those who don't have a lot of money. The poor get shoved out from opportunities the rich have available to them.

Now, there may be a stigma attached to kids in the Victor schools who come from Hunt's. I don't know if that's true now. I know it used to be. One of the school administrators talked with me about that about 10 years ago, but things might have changed by then. Regardless of whether this is true or not, the point remains that finances are not a barrier. A devoted and intelligent person can receive an excellent education and all the opportunities that come with it.

In the second reading from James we read, "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here please," while to the other who is poor you say, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" (James 2:1-4)

When I came here 13 years ago this congregation had active members from Hunt's Trailer Park. It doesn't really anymore. No one drove them away, but I've often feared that the feel of

the congregation may have become exclusive. We'd all agree that shouldn't be. Anyone from anywhere should be welcome. You've heard me say the only requirement I have of someone who wants to be a part of this congregation is that they recognize they are a sinner in need of God's grace. Beyond that I don't care.

But I have to admit my own feelings of bias. I shouldn't feel this way but I do. Sometimes when someone or a family visits our congregation I think, "I hope they're new in town. It would be great if they would join our church." I want to make sure we greet them and show them good hospitality and be welcoming. But then there are others where I think, "I'm perfectly fine if they're just here on vacation and we never see them again. I don't feel like going out of my way for them." That's a subtle judgment coming through. It is something I am conscious of and hope I never actually act upon. Cobblestone or Hunts, or anywhere in between, they should all be equally welcome.

That takes us to our gospel reading for today. This is one of the strangest and most troubling scenes we have from Jesus' life. Jesus basically calls this foreign woman and her daughter

dogs. And no, that was not a term of endearment. It was an insult.

If this text has ever troubled you and you've gone looking to commentaries for answers you'll know that they are all over the place. No one knows exactly what to make of this text or how to interpret it. Did Jesus really insult this woman for being foreign? Did she really outwit Jesus with her answer?

I can't promise that I have the right idea of what is going on here, but I have studied the Gospel of Mark very closely for years and I think I have a pretty good handle on how Mark works.

First, remember there was lots of material about Jesus floating around in the first century. When Mark wrote this gospel there was no shortage of things to include about Jesus. Mark could have very easily just ignored this little story and not included it. Instead, Mark deliberately put it in. Why?

Did he want to make Jesus look bad? Certainly not! What's the point of writing the gospel if he wants to make Jesus look

bad!? Did he want us to think that Jesus sometimes had bad days and lost his temper? Or that he didn't see this woman's comment coming as if he didn't know what was in people's minds? No. We're almost halfway through Mark's gospel here. Mark has pretty clearly established that while Jesus was indeed human, he was also divine. He knew everything about everybody.

Some have suggested this is a test Jesus puts before this woman to see if her faith is strong enough. That's an easy way to get out of this bind, but that's just not Jesus' style. While Jesus challenged the faith of many people, he never had tests or set traps for them. He was a straight shooter always.

I think our gospel writer Mark was a literary genius, one of the best ever. He knew how to write a story for an oral culture and he employs many devices in his writing. There are three times in the gospel where Jesus doesn't come out looking good. And each time it includes a startling teaching.

The first time is when Jesus returns to Nazareth and isn't well received by the home town crowd. Mark tells us, "He could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a

few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief." Here we have Jesus' power limited.

The third time is when Jesus' first attempt to heal a blind man fails. That's in 8:22 and immediately following it is where Jesus tells his followers they must take up their cross and follow him.

Our verses make up the second of these times. And here there is a jarring teaching too. I'm willing to make an educated guess that as the first hearers of this text heard it read to them they were right with Jesus when he said, "Let the children be fed first. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

These words upheld their subconscious stereotypes about foreigners. They were second rate people who were of second importance. Just like thinking, "Well, you're from Hunt's Trailer Park. I doubt your offerings will ever make a significant dent in the mortgage on this church building. You're not worth going out of our way for."

And then the jarring reply, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Say what!?! If Jesus had just healed this woman's daughter like he did everyone else the subconscious stereotype would never get challenged. It would be chalked up as Jesus just being compassionate.

Mark likes to tell about Jesus with structures and these little challenges. I think that's why he was led to include this passage. For certain Jesus knew this woman's reply all along. He was not testing her, but he did set it up in a way that brought challenges to the assumptions of his day.

Everyone is a sinner in need of God's grace. Everyone from the President of the United States to the homeless beggars who would be on the front lawn of the White House if the police didn't drive them away every night. Jesus didn't rank people and we shouldn't either. It is hard, to be sure, but it is a challenge we need to face.



When we can see the face of God in every person we meet we are not only able to give them the status and dignity they deserve, but we are also opening ourselves to the amazing joy of God's grace coming to us. Amen