

You will see light in the darkness
You will make some sense of this
When you've made your secret journey...
 (“Secret Journey”, The Police)

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Jesus was given to making...*secret journeys*. |

One was when Mary and Joseph, not long after Jesus’ birth, carried Jesus away to Egypt to hide from King Herod’s murderous wrath (Matthew 2:13-23). It was a secret journey...for safety.

Another was when Jesus, as a young boy, traveled with Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, secretly decided he would go to the Temple by himself. Three days later, Mary and Joseph found him there (Luke 2:39-52). It was a secret journey...as he said, to his “Father’s house”.

Another was many years later, soon after Jesus’ baptism by John, when Jesus traveled alone out into the wilderness for forty days (Mark 1:12-13). It was a secret journey...to face head-on the spiritual evil that bewilders the world.

And then there is the secret journey we hear of in today’s gospel reading. You could say...that it was *so* secret...that in the *telling* of it later in the gospel book...even when we hear the story...it is not immediately obvious that it *was* a secret journey. But the clues are there: First, the text says that Jesus “did not want anyone to know he was there.” And then as the two stories unfold, when we think about it, we realize that he was...alone. The disciples were not with him for a long time.

Was he *retreating*...or was he on a *mission*? We don’t know what his intention was in making his secret journey. It is possible that he traveled to predominantly non-Jewish territories imagining that he would be *unknown* there and so could have some quiet time away from his work in his homeland. Or, it is possible that he *intended* his journey as a mission. In any case, we *do* know that the regions of Tyre and the Decapolis were predominantly Gentile territories—and Jesus was *not* a Gentile.

Whatever Jesus’ intention was in making his secret journey—it would appear that Jesus experienced something there that he was not able to experience in the same way in his homeland: He had deep encounters, as a *Jew*, with people who were *not* Jews.

Excursus [1]

Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is one of the most unsettling stories...because it sounds like Jesus is harshly confronting this woman whom he’s never met before...and that he has his heart closed to her...until she outwits him. And there is no doubt that this woman was very forthright and insightful.

What makes a significant difference in how we may read the mood of this encounter hinges on the translation of *one* word. There are two very similar Greek words for “dog”—there is a word (*kuon*) that is a derisive word referring to feral dogs which wandered the streets as scavengers in those days and were a public nuisance. But there is another word for “dog” (*kunarium*) which referred to *household dogs* which would have carried a completely different sense of *endearment*. Most biblical translators and commentators assume that Jesus is comparing the Gentile woman to a *scavenger dog*. But actually, he used the word for “dog” that could be translated variously as “household dog”, “pet dog”, “little dog”, or “puppy”—and some versions of the New Testament do that, or at least have a footnote to that effect (see the Amplified Bible, New

American Standard Bible, New English Bible, New King James Version Bible, David Bentley Hart's New Testament). The difference this makes is between...depicting Jesus speaking with derision to this woman because she is a Gentile...or speaking with a tenderness toward her. Granted, Jesus could be harsh sometimes--with people who were self-righteous...self-deluding...merciless...or were testing him. But he was compassionate toward everyone else. And I believe this was the case here.

Still, there is an issue here that cannot be avoided. Even given the likelihood that Jesus spoke to her endearingly, there was still an assumption that she challenged...in which Jesus' ministry only belonged to his own kind—the Jews. I do think it is fair to say that she invited a new self-awareness in Jesus of just how universal his ministry was destined to become...and she very perceptively reflected back to him, what Jesus himself already knew to be true: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3).

So, when the next story is told with Jesus among other Gentiles in the region of the Decapolis and some friends of a deaf man bring him to Jesus for healing—there is not any banter at all about whether or not Jesus would heal him. He just does. It would appear that something definitive had shifted with Jesus that would forever change the later mission of the Church. So after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus would come to find a man named Saul—also a Jew—and would call him to do exactly that, taking the gospel message of the kingdom of God specifically to the Gentiles, thereafter to spread from one Gentile to another across the world. This was all the fruit of Jesus' *secret journey* to the region of Tyre and the Decapolis and his encounters there.

Excursus [2] and [3]

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I believe that, following after Christ, we are called to make our own secret journeys too.

It may be when we are in a place where we are not sure there is a God...or if anything matters at all. *Then we need to make our own secret journeys.*

Maybe we cannot speak of it to hardly anyone else...and our only conversation partners may be well-chosen books...or the trees, the wind, and the stars...or perhaps...a little dog. *Still, we need to make our own secret journeys.*

And even once we are Christian...there will still come times when we need to find our way...to a place of safety...a place of spiritual solace...even to a place of confrontation with evil...or a place where we can truly meet those who are different from us. *We need to make our own secret journeys.* |

I wonder what the world would be like if we made more secret journeys like Jesus.

What if *family members and friends* made secret journeys toward one another where unsaid things *could be said and heard?*

What if we made secret journeys toward each other when we get crosswise? In the TV series "The Bear", there emerges a *physical gesture* between co-workers in a restaurant which is used to wordlessly signal a desire to acknowledge fault and stop an escalating conflict. It is the American Sign Language gesture for "sorry".

What if parishioners made secret journeys to priests? Isn't that what "private confession" could be before it all got so overlaid with ideas of clerical power to bind or unbind?

What if priests made their own secret journeys to know the grace of Christ they proclaim?

What if Democrats made secret journeys to Republicans...and Republicans made secret journeys to Democrats...to truly understand the real sources of their concerns beneath all the noise?

What if enemies made secret journeys to enemies to find peace?

Well, we are not going to expect a whole lot of this kind of thing in the world. And, it isn't easy to find encouragement or help in making any such secret journeys. The world is more easily trapped in passions running high, where it is easier to use words toward strangers as if they *were* feral dogs.

But...here's the thing to remember: Making secret journeys...that feel like crossing some kind of *boundary*...beyond which we are *vulnerable*...beyond which is the *unknown*...such secret journeys are *an integral part*...of the experience of *Jesus*...and therefore belong to the heritage and mission of the *Church*...and anybody in any way connected to Church.

We are called to keep our eyes open...for when secret journeys...need to be made. We called to be the kind of people who are just different enough from all the noise...just different enough to be curious...of these secret journeys of Jesus...and to wonder when it may just be time for us...to set out on our own secret journey.

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[1] And what happened there in Jesus' secret journey to the region of Tyre and the Decapolis raises the questions about Jesus' identity which would much later be named in the Council of Chalcedon's statement of 451 AD on the "Definition of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ" (Book of Common Prayer, p. 864):

"...our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance (homoousios) with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages..."

When you read an ancient church statement like that then you may well wonder why in the world the church ended up talking about Jesus like this as "truly God and truly man". Well, there are lots of reasons from the Bible, and the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman is especially one of them.

[2] Which returns us to the Chalcedonian Definition. There was a recognition, based on the Bible, that Jesus was fully human, sharing the fullness of our human nature. Yet he was without sin by being a human being fully responsive to and in eternal communion with his Father God, even as his human understanding evolved. Jesus was completely unobstructed before God—unlike no one else in our experience—while remaining a human being clearly recognizable and experienced as a human being within the changes of time. The humanity and divinity of Jesus is a

mysterious both/and—and not an either/or. This dogma is not a matter of an abstruse philosophical distraction added onto the gospels about Jesus—but seeks to be responsible to the Church’s entire experience of Jesus which is already present in the gospels—a man both very human and yet a man who was not like any other human, a God-man.

[3] And these two stories of Jesus’ secret journey are rich with other features that merit further attention.

Notice that both the daughter and the man who were healed were healed not because they presented *themselves* for healing but because *people who loved them brought their need to Jesus*. (How may this compare to the Church’s practice of intercessory prayer, i.e. praying on behalf of others?)

Notice that the two healings could not be more different: with the daughter, Jesus heals her completely “by remote”, never seeing or touching her...whereas with the man, Jesus is not only touching him, but *placing his fingers in his ears, touching his tongue with his spittle, and speaking spiritual command words*. (This raises the difficult question which the Church has largely avoided, which is: How is Jesus’ healing ministry both similar to and different from the other familiar forms of practical magic in that time and place and subsequently thereafter?).

And notice the reference to a “demon”. (Is it possible to think of such things without resorting to either the Church’s long previous obsession with demons which was in itself an occasion for much harming of others--or resort to modern horror movie caricatures that also distort the nature of evil for entertainment purposes? Is it possible to consider that, in the case of this daughter, that there are indeed ways that we can become profoundly unwell that manifest in mental/emotional/psychosomatic illnesses now familiar to us but also at the same time an unwellness that is tethered to some *spiritual chaos and wound* that can only be addressed at its root with spiritual power, love, and wisdom?)