

“The Land of Beginning Again”
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“I wish there was some wonderful place in the Land of Beginning Again, where all our mistakes and all our heartaches, and all of our poor selfish grief could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door and never put on again. I wish we could come on it all unaware, like the hunter who finds a lost trail; and I wish that the one whom our blindness had done the greatest injustice of all could be there at the gate like an old friend that waits for the comrade he’s gladdest to hail. We would find all the things we intended to do but forgot, and remembered too late, little praises unspoken, little promises broken, and all the thousand and one little duties neglected that might have perfected the day for one less fortunate. It wouldn’t be possible not to be kind in the Land of Beginning Again, and the ones we misjudged and the ones whom we grudged their moments of victory here, would find in the grasp of our loving hand-clasp, more than penitent lips could explain. So, I wish there was some wonderful place called the Land of Beginning Again, where all our mistakes and all our heartaches, and all of our poor selfish grief could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door and never put on again.”

Poet and author Louisa Fletcher Tarkington wrote these words during the ending of her first marriage (to the infamous Booth Tarkington), words that supposedly were the origin of the song sung by Bing Crosby in the movie “The Bells of St. Mary.” A land of beginning again “where dreams come true.” Is there such a place?

We are still very early in September, which is, itself, a month of beginning again. This is true for schools and churches and, perhaps, for everyone who has an old coat to replace. It is true for our mission team, soon to depart, for a third year, to begin work in concert with many others on homes, sheds and lean-tos, with people who have been trying to begin again since 2014 and 2015. Today, in our ongoing attempts to practice Pentecost, we bring our hopes alongside an unnamed woman’s hope to begin again, who is a foreigner, an outsider, who surprisingly turns the tables on Jesus, who, in turn, enlarges the family of God by including a new people at the table. (Mark 7:24-37)

Jesus is in Gentile territory, so he is the outsider, geo-politically, speaking. He is confronted by a “Syro-phenician woman,” who although a local, is for Jesus and his disciples an outsider, socio-religiously speaking. To be precise, she is a Greek from Syria whose race is Phoenician. Bluntly put, she’s a pagan soliciting favor from a Jew, which makes the whole story scandalous from start to finish. The woman supposedly approaches Jesus in the privacy of someone’s residence, which was scandalous enough. Jesus responds in the fashion expected of a male of his day: He defends the collective honor of his people and rebuffs her. One commentator suggests that Jesus is quoting a rabbinic saying of the time: “He who eats with an idolater is like one who eats with a dog.” But the woman dares to argue with Jesus, straining the accepted protocol to its breaking point. She defends the right of “dogs” to eat crumbs from under the table where the kids eat. But the real jolt comes at the end of the story: Jesus, who masters every other opponent in verbal disputation, concedes the argument to the woman.

Oh, it was risky for Mark (and also Matthew, who tells the story) to include this story in his narrative. It is a rare story for two reasons: Jesus isn't doing the teaching in this story, and he doesn't rush to show mercy as he typically does. Many have attempted to explain, excuse, or ignore Jesus' disturbing words and behavior. And yet, I think we are better off that this story has been preserved. According to theologian Laurel Schneider, this unnamed loving mother and feisty woman persists and changes everything – “she achieved the laying of a new table to which all are invited,” she writes.... Like all disciples are called to do, she recognizes the new life Jesus has to offer, and she stops at nothing to get it, for herself, and for her child.” (*Sojourners*, article by Michaela Bruzzese)

I found a painting, maybe a self-portrait, that is attributed to a Louisa Tarkington. Two figures are featured in the painting. One woman, near the end of a dock, dressed in a flowing white dress, has her back facing the viewer, draped with long black hair in a Victorian braid. I like to think she is seeking a new beginning, because pictured closest to us is the second figure, who is chopping off her hair, which would have been a daring act in the 1920s. And as the long locks fall to the ground – like an old coat? – we see that she's wearing coveralls, over a simple white tee-shirt. Loose fit, for freedom; well worn, and her expression suggests that feels almost brand new.

To practice Pentecost, to be in the ongoing flow of holy Spirit presence and power, is to feel the possibility of beginning again. And the question peculiar to Pentecost living is this: For what are we willing to boldly ask, or boldly do, in our attempts to begin again? Willing to risk violating protocol? If not for ourselves, for someone we love? For a cause we believe in?

