

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

September 9, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 7: 24-37)

[Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that you may go – the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Okay. So, have you ever had one of those weeks? You know, when stressed, eating a pint of Cherry Garcia just really doesn't do it. Or when you run or bike for miles and your head is still swirling. And you can't even lose yourself in Candy Crush and Netflix marathons. The kind of week when you're tired, and you're angry, and if doesn't let up you are going to explode.

Most scholars think that this is where Jesus was this week. The world is getting to him. Months of constant crowds, constant needs. Never time to eat or rest. The Pharisees looking for any excuse to confront him, or arrest him, or worse. John the Baptist is dead. The crowd tried to make him king when he fed them with the loaves and fishes. A king? Seriously? Don't they get it? Even the disciples, after months, don't get it.

So Jesus goes away alone. He goes over to the Mediterranean – 150 miles he goes, northeast, to a wealthy Greek city named Tyre; a sort of a resort town. He goes where he won't have to think about Jewish laws, or traditions, or the sick, or the needy, or the messiah. Alone. Away. Anonymous. Toes in the sand. The phone turned off.

Except there is this woman, this wealthy, demanding, desperate woman, who wants Jesus to heal her daughter and she won't let it go.

Did Jesus really call her a dog? That kind of stands out there, doesn't it? I mean, I know everybody has their limits, but – but this is Jesus we're talking about. Jesus slamming this woman with an insult to her race and religion. What ever happened to, "Jesus loves all the little children of the world?" It doesn't fit. It doesn't make sense.

For many years, people have been trying to figure out what was going on in this passage. People try to explain these words away. Over the years I've heard a lot of them. Like: Jesus is tired. Just give him a break for once. Or, he is testing her. Even though this is the only time he has ever tested anybody.

Translated, the word "dog" really is "doglet," or "small dog." So he's not really calling her a snarling Rottweiler. Some people say it's not time yet for the Gentiles to know about Jesus. That time will come later. Other people say, "Oh, Jesus didn't really say that. That was added later." Why would you add this? There are a lot of theories, a lot of ways to try to soften the hurt.

Jesus' words are disturbing. They are disorienting. Is this a "#MeToo moment" for Jesus? Can you imagine the headlines if this happened today? "Leading candidate for Jewish Messiah calls woman a dog." We are shocked. We are offended by his words. That Jesus would refuse this desperate woman's plea in such a coarse way.

We are so shocked and offended that we often miss the point of the story. We are so shocked and offended that we focus on the offense that comes before the change. We focus on the challenges instead of the great learning that comes from them. We focus on the pain that is always a part of growing.

Go back in time with me for a minute to the First Century church that first heard this story. Mark's community. This Gospel was written about 70 A.D. Jerusalem was either under siege or has recently been destroyed. The Christian church was moving away from its Jewish roots. There were arguments about who could become a Christian. What of the old Jewish rules do the Christians keep? What do they give up? How will these Greeks change us? What will become of the church if we let "them" in? What does it look like to live like a Christian now? The church was changing fast. It was no longer a sect of Judaism. It was a whole new thing, changed by outsiders. And those outsiders were often referred to as dogs.

Think of all the times since then the church has had to stretch, to open up, to accept “them,” the “other,” and how painful that has been. Think of how our culture has had to stretch, to make welcome bigger and how painful that has been. Think about how long it has taken. We might laugh now, but there were days when the Irish were the “dogs.” Or the Catholics were the “dogs”. Or the Swedes, or those kids who showed up in church with long hair and jeans. Remember those days? Those people? They’re different. Strange language, no respect. They’re going to change things. What can we give up? What do we have to hold onto?

A quick aside here. Anybody here do yoga? Have you ever tried yoga? Okay. There are a few people that have done that. Downward dog? Tree pose? Yoga is about stretching, about easing tensions and opening up your body and mind. It feels so good. But it makes your muscles hurt. And you can only stretch so far in a given day. It’s slow to master.

Much like the church and culture stretching today. Trying, learning to welcome people who are outsiders – today’s “dogs” – because of their gender identity, or country of origin, or their lifestyle. Trying to welcome, to get into that pose that is unfamiliar, and that hurts. It’s slow.

Now step back into that room with Jesus and the desperate woman, and the pain and uncertainty of stretching the Gospel’s welcome. I love that this story is hard. I love that Jesus starts in one place and moves to another. I love that it’s not “poof,” everything is fine, because it doesn’t work that way in the world.

And I need to hear that it’s possible to move through today’s questions into the world that God intends for us. To move from the stuff I don’t even know and understand yet, into a place that is God’s dream.

The woman points out that God’s love is big enough, strong enough, abundant enough, for all of us. The table is big enough. The welcome is open enough. The mercy is wide enough to surround all who want to be there. And that is the point of the story. Those are the words we need to be focusing on. A reminder when the whole world is changing and swirling and full of unknown. A reminder that God’s abundant love is big enough, strong enough, and abundant enough for all of us. And, you know what? We’re going to get that wrong sometimes. But the Holy Spirit works among us to stretch us and bring us back to welcome.

The woman speaks. Jesus agreed. Jesus stretches. The church stretches. The child is healed.

When we read this passage, it’s easy enough to focus on the offense, and that’s all. It’s a bit harder to recognize that we need to keep stretching our own welcome – just like Jesus did. And did I say that’s not easy?

None of us can automatically decide that I won't ever judge anyone anymore, or all my learned prejudices will go away in an instant, because I know God loves everyone. We learn. We grow. We stretch. It hurts.

Where are the places that you are called to stretch, to reach out to someone who is not like you? To understand or accept or embrace differences?

I know there are a lot of headlines today about race and gender and political difference, and people are arguing, and there are marches and protests, and we're trying to figure out a lot of things as a culture. Maybe that's where you're called to stretch. Maybe learning more about privilege or bias is a place to stretch your spiritual muscles.

Or maybe it's closer to home. Maybe a family member has lost their way, or a colleague is angry and bitter, or there is a neighbor who is in crisis, but you don't know them real well. We are surrounded by opportunities to stretch just a little and offer a hand of love and welcome. There are always opportunities to show someone else that they are loved and wanted and gifted.

This story about Jesus and the Syrophonecian woman calls us to stretch our hearts, even if it's hard, even if we get it wrong, until we get it right. There is room enough at the table. God's love is big enough, strong enough, full to overflowing. We are all held in it. We are held in it, brothers and sisters, children of God. We are held and strengthened, and sent out to share the good news. We can be the ones to help open up God's reign in this world.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.