

## ***Sermon***

### ***Once We Acknowledge...***

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We meet Jesus in our Gospel from Mark today in a most unusual place. You could look at this passage as another healing passage but it is not. This particular story can only be found in Mark's gospel so it is impossible to compare its account with the other Gospels. But it was important enough for Mark to include it. Mark is one of the three Synoptic Gospels. As the shortest of the four Gospels, it was likely the first, or earliest to be written. Mark illustrates who Jesus is as a person. The ministry of Jesus is revealed with vivid detail and the messages of his teaching are presented more through what he did than what he said. It is said this Gospel was written for the gentiles and this can be concluded because you often hear Jewish customs explained in this book, something that would not be necessary had this been intended for the Jews.

Why do I say this healing story of Jesus is unusual – it is strange because of how Jesus responds...when this Gentile woman begs for Jesus' help with her daughter, he responds..."Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Wow. So Jesus reference to the "children" here is the Jews – and his reference to the Gentiles...well, he compares them to dogs. Not the kind, fair, equitable God of the least and the lost we are used to. It's unusual because Jesus in this statement is fully human. He has given into the tendency of the flesh to measure the value of people based on earthly qualities, not divine. We

don't get a glimpse into His humanness very often but Mark, who did such a brilliant job explaining Jesus as a person, felt it was important to bring this account forward. The Syrophoenician woman, as with most of us mothers, doesn't accept this response – she came to help her daughter and she is not leaving until she has exhausted every possible avenue so she responds – this Gentile woman of no ranking whatsoever within this community, responds to Jesus...saying, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” And with this statement, it appears Jesus is touched by the divine and provides the response we expect – “For saying that, you may go- the demon has left your daughter.”

The Syrophoenician woman had everything going against her when she pushed her way into Jesus' presence. She was a woman and a Gentile from the wrong side of the tracks. She had no right to engage Jesus in conversation. And to be referred to as a dog may have made many of us wither away but not her. She boldly asks for healing...Jesus is reminded in this moment that his mission is not restricted to the Jews. God's love expands beyond all barriers.

The story that follows is of the deaf man with a speech impediment. In this case the people beg Jesus to lay his hands on the man and heal him. For people in the first century, a physical impairment was not merely an inconvenience, it was viewed as a result of sin – sin committed by the person or by their parents. That somehow this was of their own doing. And this caused them to be shunned by their community, to become an outcast.

The woman's daughter – likely suffering from some sort of mental disorder or deficit and this man, deaf likely due to a birth defect and speech due to the hearing loss – did no more to effect their station than I did in being born with brown eyes. And this made me wonder – as much as I would like to say 21 centuries later – that we have evolved and no longer segregate people from our community for being different or suffering an illness they cannot control – I'm afraid we have not. People with mental illness, addictions, depression – are still viewed as willfully making their own lot in life and refusing help by those who do not understand these diseases. We often do blame others for their illnesses. And today, we blame those who are not vaccinated for being sick with COVID or spreading it to others because by taking a vaccine we know they can prevent that.

Human beings suffer from a deep insecurity that pushes us to create rules that give status and value to some while denigrating others. In the first century, the poor, the infirm, the orphaned, the mentally ill, the immigrant and many women lived with very low status. And today these people still live on the margins of society. There continues to be a sense that if people end up homeless, unemployed or on drugs, they are weak and at fault.

Our scripture from Proverbs which doesn't come up a lot in the lectionary but it's a great book that gives us pretty clear direction on how to live. The task of Wisdom literature, like Proverbs, is character formation. It seeks to train up young people in the way they should go. It upholds the virtues of honesty, hard work, self-control, and respect for those in authority, among other things. And it addresses issues of everyday life like

economics, friends, family, politics, etc. Our reading today says “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver and gold”...integrity, honesty, and responsibility...and tolerance for those who might think and live differently than we do. “The rich and the poor have this in common the Lord is the maker of them all” Simply, we at our most basic level are fashioned alike by God. And the exploitation of the poor – “do not rob the poor because they are poor” – those with little are easily preyed upon – think of payday lenders charging exorbitant interest rates because their customers have nowhere else to turn.

Our scriptures today and throughout the lectionary this year have led us to one place...community. Loving our neighbor...and understanding that if the community is segregated, divided – it cannot stand. If our church is divided, it will not serve God. So I ask you – are you a peacemaker or do you fan the flames of division? Maybe you do it and you don’t even realize you’re doing it...Do you truly try and see others point of view or do you share your beliefs in such a way that shames others for not thinking like you? What do I mean here...when I look at social media posts sometimes, and I’ll include myself on this, I see things that are pretty harsh and sarcastic. And I wonder if you look at your last 10-15 posts, if you use social media, would it tell me that you follow the teachings of Christ? The truth is everything that divides us – literally everything – gender, class, sexual orientation, rich, poor, Jew, Gentile, fat, thin – white, black, brown – you name it – all these things are not of God – all these walls, all these segmented, broken parts – we created this in our humanness. Even Jesus in his moment of humanness did this – He separated the value of a Gentile

life verses the value of a Jewish life. But he is quickly corrected by the divine. And so can we be.

Status is a product of our own imaginations, invisible to God. Once we acknowledge that there are no walls separating us, love and mercy flow unfettered and all people are deemed equally valuable.

Amen