

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Sept. 8 2024- Homecoming

James 2:1-10; 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

This story of Jesus with the Gentile woman of Syrophenician roots makes me more uncomfortable the older I get. To see Jesus apparently engaging in the bigotry of the Jewish people of the day towards Gentiles, particularly those near the port city of Tyre is shocking. To hear him use the comparison of this Gentile woman to a dog fits with general Jewish attitudes of the day and would have been no surprise to the disciples nor even the audience hearing the Gospel of Mark read to them around 70 CE.

But it feels different today, doesn't it? Certainly, after the Civil Rights movement of the 60's and the aftermath of George Floyd's killing made clear again our own national struggles with racism. Certainly, after the years following 9/11 as Islamophobia and negative assumptions about Muslims abounded. Certainly, after the #MeToo movement that brought to light the constant undercurrents in our society of sexism and the casual abuse of women that engenders.

I don't know how to explain this passage about Jesus. Perhaps it is the humanity of Jesus showing through. That even he was shaped in some ways by the culture he was raised in. That is about as 8th commandment as I can get here. That is the best possible light I can see this in. But there are two positive things to note. Important ones.

First. The woman persists. She takes the derogatory premise of Jesus' assumption and turns it back to him. Fine, think me a dog, but heal my child!

Which you should do by your own logic. Dog's eat from the scraps, so cast me a crumb! She fits well into a long line of people who talk back to God and are heard. Who stand up and say, even in your own eyes this is not right!

Second, Jesus does buck the cultural expectation. In the end, he shows no bias. The Gentile woman from Tyre receives what she has asked for. Is this not what the Reign of God that Jesus says has come near in him is about? That God's mercy comes to heal sinner and saint alike? Does Jesus not touch the leper- treating him just like one who is whole? Does he not eat with sinners as well as those who believe they are righteous? In the Reign of God there are- to quote Paul- no slave nor free, Jew nor Greek. There are not Hawkeyes or Cyclones. There are only beloved children of God. Only those sinners in need of healing.

In the next story of healing in Mark, Jesus takes the man who cannot hear and cannot speak aside and he looks to heaven and signs as he says, "Be Opened!". The word for sighed is the same for a sound made when exerting pressure. It is sometimes used to describe the sound a woman makes at childbirth. What is Jesus giving birth to here? Are we the one who is deaf and mute? Is Jesus working to unstop our ears so that we may hear, really hear what he is calling us to? Is he birthing us, making us new, to open our mouths to come proclaim with him? Is that what his struggle is? One even more informed by his own brush with what humanity can do to each other? Oh, be opened my beloved!

Jesus can open stubbornly closed ears and loosen tongues to speak. He can open eyes to see the truth. That a new way of being has come through him. Everything old has been cast away. Behold! Everything has been made new.

James gets at this with his community. Helps them open their eyes. Friends, he says, what do you do when someone walks in our fellowship with a fine Rolex, nice clothes, polished shoes? How do you treat them? Now friends, what do you do when someone comes in dressed in dirty jeans, with a smudged face, ratty shoes. How do you treat them? The difference James describes in that treatment- the wealthy are given a seat and the grubby are told to stand in a corner or sit on the floor at my feet. That difference was a cultural one. Society of that day ran on patronage. You needed somebody with wealth (at least more than you) to help you survive, get work, etc. You paid them by offering them respect, showing deference. If no one could offer you anything, then they were treated with disregard at best. This behavior was as common as calling a Gentile woman a dog. It was just how the world worked.

James asks, do you really have faith if you still live as if the amount of wealth a person has determines how you treat them? Is that really even faith?

James asks a very good question in verse 14, "Can faith save you?" As Christians who happen to be Lutheran our knee jerk response might be, "Yes!". We are justified by grace through faith. That's what confirmation taught us. But go farther in the quote. We are justified by grace through faith for the sake of Christ. It is God in Jesus who saves. For it is from God that even the gift of faith comes. So, you could say, no- faith can't save you. Jesus does.

The next thing is to ask the question, what is faith? Is faith a mental assertion to a list of ideas? Yes, we ought to love one another. Yes, the hungry should be fed. Yes, the naked should be clothed. Believe all those? Great, you have faith! Thanks, I'll put that in my wallet and go about my life.

No, James says. What you have is belief. Not faith. Faith is the active living out of your beliefs. And as such, faith is the expression of what you really believe. The story of acrobat Charles Blondin. Can I carry someone across in this wheelbarrow? Yes! Then climb in. Climbing in is faith.

Faith, as we know in the Gospel of Luke is a verb, an action. Faith is done. Lived. We have discovered that faith in Mark is also a verb. It is following. Moving. Living as we follow Jesus where he goes.

James puts it very succinctly. Faith without works is dead. It isn't even faith. You can have the right belief- feed the hungry, clothe the naked, but if your neighbor shows up starving and naked and all you do is say- be well, be fed, stay warm and you go on your way. But don't feed or clothe them. What good is that? To you or them?

Friends, the reign of God that we are made members of through the cleansing waters of baptism and the power of the Word that comes to us in Jesus, that reign totally changes our lives. Our eyes are opened to see a different world. One that operates on different values from the reign of this world. For as citizens of the reign of God (when we are at our best), we feed hungry and satisfied alike. We clothe the naked, shelter the homeless. We welcome all to the table. We see every human being as one who is made in God's image, and we treat them that way.

This is who Jesus calls us to be. Leads us to be. Died for us to be.

How are we doing at this? I'm not asking about you, specifically, though that's not a bad question. I'm asking how WE are doing. Together. Collectively.

On this Homecoming Sunday, we celebrate the fact that faithfulness is not just ours individually, but ours collectively. We give thanks for those ancestors in the faith who raised us- whether at St. John or elsewhere. We celebrate that we have a community where we can come and be fed when we are hungry. Comforted when we are mourning. Come to be supported in our trials and celebrated in our victories. We give thanks for a community that will speak truth to us in love as James is doing to his community. Who will hold us accountable like the Gentile woman did to Jesus.

We do not claim perfection. We are a messy bunch. Individually and collectively saints and sinners. Living up to the highest calling of Jesus one minute and disappointing him the next. Welcoming all without partiality one minute and then treating folks differently the next.

We gather, because it is here that we find hope and healing. For it is here that we know Jesus will open our ears to hear the Good News and open our mouths to speak that same Good News. We know it is here that we can come for healing. To be fed with the Bread of Life that we take into every cell of our being. That transforms us to not just believe, but to have faith. To follow after Jesus and live out the reality that we live first and foremost according to the rules of the reign of God, not of our culture.

This outpost of the reign of God that has been St. John, that has been here for 168 years, this is our home. For some of us, just for a short time. For others, for a lifetime. But regardless, we give thanks for this assembly and for all those present, past, and future who have been part of it. For all those who inspire us to live out our faith not just in word, talking a good game, but in deed and in truth.

We have spent this past summer pondering what the Reign of God that Jesus has brought near by his presence looks like. It is a wondrous place. Where no one is called “dog”. Where enemies are loved. The hungry are fed. The broken are made whole. Where peace prevails.

We live as citizens of that world even as we remain in this one. We strive to be faithful to that reign of God, and even so fall short. But what we know, is that God’s love for us in Jesus never wavers. And that regardless of how unworthy we think we are... he will forgive us. He will welcome us home. He will heal us.

Thanks be to God.