

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Pentecost 16
September 9, 2018

Dogs and Hospitality Mark 7:24-37

I tend to think that the more challenging or difficult a passage, the more likely it is to lead to a great sermon. Which means, of course, that there should be a lot of great sermons heard across the country this morning, as this week's Gospel Reading is a doozy!

What makes it hard, of course, is that Jesus comes off as down right rude, if not worse. I mean, I understand that he's fled Tyre for some R&R, and Lord knows literally and figuratively, that he deserves it. So I can only imagine how incredibly frustrating, even disappointing, it was to discover that his fame had spread even as far as this distant beach resort and to have his vacation so completely spoiled by yet one more request. Okay, I get that.

But really, did Jesus have to call her a "dog"? I mean, goodness, but which one of us, if one of our children was possessed by a demon and we suddenly heard that a miracle worker from distant parts had ventured unexpectedly into our neighborhood, wouldn't also go and ask this Favor? Jesus has never been anywhere near Tyre before, and he's not likely to come this way again, and so this woman does what any desperate parent would do. She runs and falls at the feet of Jesus in an act of at least respect if not downright worship, and she begs, fervently, for the restoration and healing of her

beloved little girl; and in return all she gets is, not just a rebuke, but an insult; actually, a mean, ugly slur.

Now, I know there is a way of softening this scene, of recasting the whole passage in fact. It's a feat of textual gymnastics that many of us – including myself – have resorted to upon occasion, and it requires two moves. First, Jesus doesn't call her a dog, but rather a puppy. He's being affectionate, not insolent. You know, like "sorry little puppy, but it's just not your time yet." While a fairly dubious piece of linguistic work to begin with, this interpretation, as far as I can tell, doesn't really solve the problem. Whether "puppy" or "dog," it's still a pretty obnoxious thing to call a desperate mom who is seeking help.

The second twist in the traditional reading of this difficult passage is to say it's all a test, kind of like Job, in the Old testament. Except that Jo, unlike Job, nowhere does this passage indicate it's a test and, in fact, it would be the only example of this kind of move in the Gospel of Mark. And, honestly, why does this desperate woman, who's already demonstrated her great faith by coming to Jesus alone, bowing at his feet, and beseeching him for healing, (demonstrating her belief that Jesus can, in fact, heal her daughter, need to be tested, let alone in such a demeaning way?

I think this more traditional interpretation appeals to us because on the surface, at least, it preserves the picture of Jesus we hold in our hearts – perfect in compassion, courage, and love. Yet, we need to remember that

this is Mark's Gospel we're talking about, not John's and so maybe, just maybe Jesus hasn't fully lived into his messianic consciousness. Actually, That's just fancy way of saying that maybe even Jesus doesn't quite realize just how expansive God's kingdom is yet. Maybe this desperate woman pushes Jesus, stretches his vision of God's grace, makes clear to Jesus in an unexpected and initially unwelcome way that there is room in God's kingdom for all, for Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, insider and outsider, even dogs like her and her daughter.

If so, then I think we should give thanks for this desperate mother and her fierce parental love, for in it we see as clearly as anywhere in the gospel the character of God's tenacious commitment and God's similarly fierce love for all God's children.

But there's also one more thing this reading of the passage does: it makes us aware of the unexpected blessing and insight a stranger might bring to us. Most of our churches are, when you get down to it, pretty homogeneous. And while that's perhaps understandable it can also be limiting, as we tend to bring the same perspectives, share the same experiences, and hold common assumptions about God, the world, and our faith. But every once in a while someone who is totally different from us might stumble upon our congregation to join us for worship or service, and then suddenly the question becomes how will we welcome this person. Will strangers feel welcome or, well strange? Will they sense people eager to make a place for them or feel the need to fit in and conform to the way things are?

Let's face it: hospitality, for most of us, means being patient and polite while we wait for newcomers to become more like us. But can we understand hospitality as a willingness to be open to the distinct gifts and perspectives of someone who is different? Can we even imagine that hospitality is an openness to receiving people who are different from us as gifts of God given to change and stretch us? Combine this particular aspect of the passage with the letter from James, our first reading for today, and you might find a pretty powerful sermon this Sunday that is for many congregations the opening of a new program year in our congregations.

However you may read this passage, know that I am grateful for your fierce faith and determination to proclaim the good news of God's desperate and untiring love for us and for all the world. It is welcome, even crucial news for a world starved for love. Thank you for your witness to God's love in this place. Even more, I thank God for you.

Today is Rally Day, the day we begin again to set aside time for bible study in our congregation on Sunday morning. The purpose of Christian education is not to equip us to compete with one another to see who knows the most. The purpose is to equip one another to become more like Christ so that we serve God in the world. We learn the books of the Bible, the 10 Commandments and the Beatitudes not as ends unto themselves, but so that we will learn how to listen to God, be the church and recognize that the spirit is with us.

It is not enough to be informed; we have to be formed. It is not enough to engage the intellect; we have to engage our whole lives. It is not enough to understand; we have to follow Christ.

We learn to follow Christ when we feed the hungry, care for the sick, and help the disabled make lives for themselves. We learn to follow Christ when we defend the oppressed, refuse to stereotype, and build friendships across lines. We learn to follow Christ when we talk about our faith to people who may snicker, invite friends to church, and pray for those who still do not know the Savior.

Following Jesus is hard. There is no playing it safe and to looking back. Today, God invites us on a journey that is demanding, difficult, and dangerous. Jesus' followers never get it completely right, but God helps us to try. Left on our own we can't put our hands to the plow without looking back, but Christ's hands guide, support, and strengthen us.

Every Sunday at our church, we learn to follow Christ. We read the Bible and hear something new. We learn that the best teachers are Christians who are trying to serve. We learn that being kind is more important than being right. We learn that it is those moments of recognizing God's presence that makes life spectacular. We learn that love, not time heals all wounds. We learn that we can always pray for someone when we don't have the strength to help them in any other way. We learn that no matter how serious life requires us to be, we need friends to laugh with. We learn

that life is tough, but God is always with us. We learn that the best way to grow as Christians is to surround ourselves with better Christians. We learn that while everyone wants to live on top of the mountain, joy and growth happen while you are climbing the mountain. We learn that when we follow Christ, Christ walks beside us.

The last week of August and the first week of September