

Season after Pentecost [Proper 18B]

September 5, 2021

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Isaiah 35: 4-7a; Psalm 146: James 2: 1-10, 14-17; Mark 7: 31-37

Grace to you and peace from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

What was the last thing you had to learn and who was your teacher? Many of us had to learn some new technology over the last year and a half — ZOOM, cell phone apps like Grub Hub and Door Dash, how to access worship on the internet or Facebook, how to place an on-line grocery order. We usually learn new technology from someone with experience who could walk us through it, by phone, email, texting, Google or a YouTube tutorial. Teachers and students throughout Washington County are learning from best practices guidelines how to navigate school while using masks, sanitizer, and social distancing. Just last Sunday, Jesus taught me again that it's not just my actions and words but my heart that needs conversion — Which sent me into some serious consideration on how I speak about those who disagree with me about hot political issues or the use of that handy invention called a turn signal when driving. We are learning all the time. Sometimes it's adjusting or adding to something we already knew. Other times, the learning curve is steep and it takes a lot of time, repetition, patience and a good teacher.

In today's gospel Jesus finds himself learning from an unexpected person — a person he had been raised to avoid — someone who is not Jewish, a descendant of the ancient-enemy Canaanites AND a woman not of his family. Before you can hear his story, you need to be at peace with what we profess in our creeds — that Jesus was fully human as well as divine.

Jesus was not just pretending to be a human who just needed to pop into a phone booth or twirl like Wonder Woman to change back into his divine suit. To be truly with us, Jesus was born of a human mother, learned to walk and talk, say please and thank you, read, do chores, and study the Hebrew Bible and learn from rabbis. As he grew in his connection to God, he also grew in his understanding of God's mission for him and his life. He had to learn that when he put his faith and trust, his life and will in the hands of God, God could do amazing things through him, like heal, teach, stand up against injustice, feed thousands and even willingly giving his life for the sake of others. Jesus reveals the nature of God AND Jesus shows us what God is able to do through us human beings when we are aligned with the love and will of God. Watch Jesus to see the character of God. But also watch Jesus to see how to be more fully and faithfully a human who loves God.

Jesus' encounter with the nameless Syrophenician, gentile woman is downright uncomfortable. Jesus calls this woman a "dog," which was an insult. It seemed to be a favorite Hebrew slur for the gentiles — those who were not Jewish. Among the Hebrews, dogs were considered unclean, maybe because they went around eating other things declared to be unclean. For whatever reason, when this desperate gentile, Syrophenician woman comes begging Jesus to cast the demons out of her tortured daughter, Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The logic of his argument may be sound — you wouldn't deprive your child of food to feed the dog. But the meaning of what he said was more like, "Let the Hebrews to whom I have been sent benefit from my teaching and signs, not dogs like you." There is no getting around it. What Jesus said to this desperate woman was rude. That's not like the Jesus we love and who died for the love of all people.

This story has made biblical scholars and preachers so uncomfortable that they have gone to great lengths to reframe it so Jesus doesn't seem so insulting. Some say, well, Jesus was just tired after another round of conflict with the Pharisees and scribes. He just wanted some down time and this woman just wouldn't let him. But, wait, there are other times Jesus is tired or hurting and still heals and feeds those who come to him in need. Others say. Oh Jesus really didn't mean it. He was just testing her faith before granting her request. I don't go for it. Jesus didn't make other people prove their faith before healing or helping — that would be contrary to grace. And besides, this woman never says she believes. She is there in hope and desperation. Somehow this woman has heard that Jesus had previously healed and driven demons out of others and she will do anything she can ---- anything, including bowing at the feet of a stranger she might normally avoid — to plead and beg for the sake of her daughter. One other attempt to soften this exchange was to note that the Greek word used here for "dog" really means a "little dog" or a "puppy" and Jesus was just teasing her. Really? Whether it is young or old, calling someone a dog is not sentimental or kind. One last explanation I read was to say Jesus was using the occasion to teach those around him about the inclusiveness of God's grace. Is that any less offensive to think that Jesus would humiliate an anguished, despairing mother for an object lesson? No, we just have to live with this uncomfortable scene and wonder why Mark would include this unflattering picture of Jesus.

Come at this story another way with me. Yes, Jesus is exhausted. He went into Tyre, NOT your usual vacation spot for a Jew of his time, to get away from the Judean, Hebrew crowds. His rest is interrupted by a woman who won't be stopped by disciples, crowds or even an insult. She doesn't know for sure if this man Jesus can cure her daughter but, by

whatever God you want to claim, she will stop at nothing to ask in case he really has the power to save her child from a life of torment. Now Jesus is faced with a new situation — he is in gentile territory and this foreign gentile woman is asking him to do for her what he has usually done only for fellow Jews before. Oh, yes there was that man possessed by unclean spirits who got up close and personal with Jesus the moment he stepped out of the boat in the gentile area of the Gerasenes. But this is different. This woman presents no immediate threat and is pleading for her daughter who is not even there. For whatever reason, Jesus rather crassly says no. I'm here from my people, not you and yours. But this woman is not done.

She steps over the ethnic slur and insult and turns his analogy on its head. Yes, "Sir, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." How much time actually passed before Jesus made his next remark? He could have decided he didn't want to help her. He was on vacation. I'm not here for your kind. Instead, Jesus says something peculiar, "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter."

Whether Jesus knew it already, needed to learn it again or was realizing it more fully, this woman had spoken gospel truth to him. "For saying *that*." For saying what? That God's saving love and grace are to be for all people, Jews AND Gentiles, those of his own religious and ethnic background AND those he had been raised to mistrust and avoid. It's a pivotal moment in the ministry of Jesus. His mission has broadened. In the very next scene in Mark's gospel, Jesus meets up with a gentile deaf man, whom he cures saying, "Ephphatha" — "be opened." I wonder if Jesus was showing that it was not just the deaf man whose ears and understanding need to be healed but all of us who, like himself, had bought into the divides and barriers of "us" and "them," clean and unclean, insider and outside, those we think worthy of God's love and those who are not. To that, Jesus, recalling that woman in Tyre, says, Ephphatha — be opened. Put down the defenses, give up the self-righteousness, let God's presence in the word, meal, community and neighbor change us. Ephphatha. Be opened to the truth that Jesus tells and shows us — God loves *all* people. God thinks *all* people are worthy of more than crumbs. Amen.

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