

## Sermon: The Heart of Faith

Lesson: Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Lesson: James 2: 1-17

Lesson: Mark 7: 24-37

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He was worn out. Frustrated. People were in constant need. The more he helped the more they came. The message he had to give was being lost amidst the unending work. And the people who should most understand what he was trying to do refused to listen. Even the people closest to him did not understand what he who he was and what he was doing. He just wanted a little time alone to refresh himself: time to rest, and time to spend in prayer to strengthen himself for the work he was supposed to do.

He left the region where he was most known, and went to a nearby country, a country of a different sort of people, people who were not likely to take much notice of one of his kind. He went into a house, hoping that no one would notice him there. It did not work.

A woman of the area heard that he had come and immediately went to him. Not concerned with his needs, she insisted on seeing him and then demanded that he heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Impatiently, Jesus brushed aside her need, and insulted her. Although all turns out well in the end, this passage is most difficult. It leaves us feeling very uncomfortable.

In previous sermons on this awkward encounter between the Gentile woman and Jesus, I have assumed that the woman was vulnerable, and obviously desperate as any caring parent of a very ill child would be. She may have been these things and Matthew's version of the story, which takes a different tone from Mark's, makes that reading possible. Mark's version, however, offers another image for this woman, as I learned first in a conversation with Eric recently, and then found in a paper by Jane E. Hicks.

Jesus was trying to find a bit of rest in the region of Tyre, a region outside the home of the Israelites. Tyre was a cosmopolitan area of Syria. Israelites were considered less cultured and of far less status than the Syrians, or Syrophenicians. Breaking into his respite was this woman, whose very bearing may have suggested arrogance, or at least presumption that she had a right to his attention. Despite the fact that she bowed at his feet, she acts with the presumptions of the culture that looked down on the Israelites as lesser beings. The New Revised Standard Version of the Scriptures says the woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter, but the Greek word could also mean asked or even demanded.

To this Jesus responded, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This is shocking for us to hear from Jesus. We hear him saying, "I don't care about you or your daughter." However, what Jesus *is* saying is, "Why should I spend my precious energy on you? You and your people have looked down on the children of God, the Israelites, and scorned our God. I am worn out just trying to reach *them!* I

am not a traveling medicine man who dances to the tune of whoever tosses coins at my feet. My God and I are not at your beck and call.”

Mark has a terse way of writing. It sounds as if the Syrophenician woman immediately comes back with her famous line, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” I can just imagine, though, that it might have been a little different. Mark, who is very fond of the word immediately, chooses not use it at this point in the story. There may have been a moment of hesitation as the woman absorbs the rebuke. She *has* come with only her need in mind, without a thought of Jesus’ needs, of the God whose grace and love empowers Jesus, nor whether or not she has any right to *ask* anything of him, much less demand it. Jesus’ rebuke challenges the woman to see beyond her immediate need, to accept a new way of looking at other people, to acknowledge the *God of Israel* as the gracious source of all life.

We do not know whether any or all of this flashed through the mind of the Syrophenician woman. We only know that with humility, she accepted the implied inverted order of power and acknowledged the healing power of the God of Israel. With her response, she declared that the God of Israel is so great, that even the crumbs of his grace will be sufficient, and admits she does not claim any right to anything more than that. In a final demonstration of the new order, Jesus dismissed the woman, “For saying these things, you may go,” and told her that because she has taken this approach, not one of demanding, her daughter has been healed.

The presumptive attitude is not limited to the Syrophenician woman. The Church has been as susceptible to the presumption of power and privilege as is the rest of humanity. This is revealed early on in the life of the Church. James speaks sharply about this to the Church in his letter. The New Revised Standard Version, which we read this morning puts it most bluntly. “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism *really believe* in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” The Greek allows for this verse to be read as a question, a statement, or an exclamation. Some versions word this a little less offensively – “My brothers, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. (NKJV). NEB – “My brothers, believing as you do in our Lord Jesus Christ, who reigns in glory, you must never show snobbery.” The Message – “Don’t let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious Christ-originated faith.” I like those better, don’t you? There are a lot easier to hear.

We might prefer these softer versions. However, after re-reading the passage from Mark, I am inclined to go with the NRSV straightforward version – one that shocks us just as Jesus’ words to the Syrophenician woman shocked her and as much as James’ words must have shocked and offended the church to which they were written. This question causes us to step back and assess what is at the heart of our faith; why we are seeking God in Jesus Christ, how we are living our faith.

Calvin, who could speak as bluntly as anyone, saw this same presumption in the Church of the Reformation. In his commentary on Genesis, he declares, “no one can be injurious to their brother or sister without wounding God.” (Johnson, William Stacy, John Calvin: Reformer for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p. 14). In his commentary on Jeremiah, Calvin also concludes that “God is known where humanity is cared for.” (commentary

on Jeremiah 22:16, Johnson, p. 20). Calvin's biographer, William Stacy Johnson, concludes that "Where people fail to do justice, argued Calvin, we can be sure that they do not know God." (Johnson, p. 20). Calvin, firm in his Reformed theology of "Grace alone" also believed that faith must reveal itself in life. In this way Calvin challenged the church of his time in the same way James challenged his.

James' Greek word for favoritism, comes from the practice of bowing one's head to the floor before a ruler or governor. Those who were considered worthy, or who were recognized as people of value would have their faces lifted by the hand of the one before whom they knelt. The two, supplicant and ruler, would then speak face to face. Those whose faces were not lifted, would be left in a humiliating position.

Having alluded to this practice, James then offers a telling example of what he means about the wrongful casual acceptance of the social hierarchy. When two people came into the fellowship, whether for worship, study or community, James does not specify, they had been greeted differently by their brothers and sisters in Christ, often on the appearance of their clothes and accessories. The challenge that comes through clearly in the Greek, is not quite as evident in English. God in Jesus Christ, has lifted the faces of all these who are claimed by Christ so that they might see God face to face; you are discriminating and looking down on them based on their clothing and accessories. By his question – do you really believe? – James asks, "Who do you think you are?"

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ who laid aside his glory for the sake of all humanity, for your sake and for the sake of all those who are called to be your brothers and sisters, how can you look down and misuse those whom Christ has also called? How can you consider yourself more worthy than they?

The healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter came through humility, not humiliation. However, it took a strong challenge to her pride to reach that point. The Church in the time of James, the Church in the time of Calvin, and the Church of our time needs to have that same challenge. We need to hear, "With your endless arguments over ordination, your endless excuses as to why other activities are more important than worship or fellowship or mission or evangelism, with your ambition and accommodation and apathy to the needs of others, *do* you really believe in the Jesus Christ who came to save you from your sins, who came in the flesh to reveal the God of glory and grace to you in a most compelling way, who came to lift your face from the existence that is limited by sin so that you can see the righteous vision of the eternal God? Do we really believe?"

In a few moments we will celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. We often come to this sacrament with mixed motives. We may come as a form of penance – accepting that hearing once again how much Christ suffered is the price we pay for the sins we continue to commit. We may come with a sense of hope, with a strong sense of *our* need for forgiveness, for healing. We may come with a sense of joy, relishing the experience of the nurturing of God in Christ in the special way that this sacrament offers to *us*. We may even come with a bit of arrogance, imagining ourselves to be entitled to be here. For whatever reason we come, the truth is we will receive this gift of the body and blood of Christ, the bread and wine of God's own

giving, as ones who do not deserve to be given even crumb.

Not deserving even crumbs, we receive here, nevertheless, a banquet, a marvelous feast, a foretaste of the life to come, the nourishment necessary for the life to which we are called to be in service.

During this sacrament, we will be reminded of Jesus Christ's words to his disciples, and to us, "Take, eat, do this in remembrance of me." For the longest time when I have heard those words I have taken them to say that I must remember what happened to Jesus Christ, what he did so long ago. After preparing this sermon, I hear them in a new way. Do this in remembrance of me – do this remembering who I *am*; remembering what I have revealed to you about the love of God in my life, death, and resurrection; how I am calling you and empowering you– now, at this very moment and always –to be my follower. Do this, live as though if anyone asks, "do you really believe?" another might answer, "yes, for in this person I have seen Christ in action." Do this in remembrance of me – remembering that I am with you always, to challenge, to redeem, to heal, to restore, to bring new life."

As we gather around this table, let us do so with joy and thanksgiving in our hearts for the undeserved and love-filled redemption given to us in grace by God in Jesus Christ. Let us look around us for those whom God has called to be our brothers and sisters, and then let us carry the remembrance of who Christ *is* into all aspects of our daily lives, looking around us at all times, to see the face of Christ in those around us in all places – allowing our vision to be stretched into God's vision, seeing both those near at hand, and those far away, those who are similar to us and those who are very different as our brothers and sisters, our fellow sinners and our fellow redeemed. With the humility of the Syrophenician woman, let us not look down upon anyone, but with the hand of Christ lift up the face of each one whom we meet, greeting them with the heart of faith, with the faith of those whose unworthy faces have been lifted up by the power and grace of God, with the faith of those who truly believe in Jesus Christ.