

First Scripture Reading Mark 7:24-37

Second Scripture Reading James 2:1-17

In our Gospel lesson from today, we have two stories mirroring each other, standing side by side. We have two stories of Jesus entering Gentile lands, and healing those who have been broken away from their communities. Each have ailments which have ripped them away from participating in their communities, and they are in desperate need of healing. These pitiable characters are isolated from their society. For them healing does not only mean that they are physically healed, but restored to full communion within their communal life. In the case of the girl, she has a demon and in the case of the man who can neither speak nor hear. Both stories have others interceding on the account of those in need of healing. Both have proxies bowing and begging before the feet of Christ. Yes these stories are so similar, so alike in so many ways. These stories are marked off by Jesus attempting to enter the Gentile region secretly, and failing miserably, and then attempting to leave in secret and failing even more. The story of the Syrophenician woman opens with Jesus' failed attempt to escape notice, and concludes with the healing of the deaf man, with Jesus' defeated order to secrecy. The text tells us that after he healed the man he told the group "Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it". The harder Jesus presses secrecy the more widely the news is broadcast. Throughout the Gospel of Mark we have interwoven this failed attempt to keep the identity, the work of Christ a secret.

As alike as these stories are, there are some incredible differences. The largest and most abrasive difference is the treatment of the Syrophenician woman. We do not know very much about this woman besides her Gentile ethnicity, or to be more specific Syrophenician. We know she must be incredibly bold, not only is she a woman living in antiquity who would dare to

approach the man Jesus for her daughter's exorcism. And not only that but she must have some sense of who Christ is in order to approach him for this exorcism of demons. Here we have this woman, crossing cultural, religious, ethnic, gender boundaries, and if she has any sense of who Christ is, she is crossing the largest gap of all, between herself the creature, and God her Creator. This seems to be the fulfillment of what Jesus spoke of earlier in this same chapter, right before Jesus goes into the region of Tyre, when He said "Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile them...it is what comes out from a person that defiles. For it is from within the human heart, that evil intentions come". According to Jesus, right before we encounter this woman, it is no longer food which defiles a person. No instead the defiled person is defined by the wickedness, the hatred within their hearts. Along with food which was previously forbidden we can place anything else that does not come from the heart as being pronounced holy by Christ. Everything else that the culture said was defiled, her ethnicity, her gender it is all pronounced holy by Christ. This woman seems to be the first fruit of this breaking down of barriers, she seems to be the beginning of the kingdom proclaimed where we are not defined as being defiled by what is outside of ourselves, but only by what is within our hearts. She crosses the barriers which exist between herself and her Creator, not swayed by what her society has determined to be impossible gaps.

We do not need to look very far to find this kind of defilement within our society. We do not have to look very far to find examples of people clinging to what is outside the heart as a definition for defilement. We see cultures which continue to define what is holy and what is different and defiled, too far from God for God to redeem. We find people who see those who are different as being defiled by what is different. But the judgment that Christ pronounces is indeed the evil, the wickedness within our own hearts is that which defiles us. We latch onto

these definition, we allow them to define the world that we live in. But this is not the world that the Gospel is calling us to.

James seems to echo this condemnation when he asks the reader “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ”. James begins this section by denouncing favoritism and partiality. He is denouncing favoritism for those who are rich over those who are poor. James is demanding the reader to examine their acts of favoritism, their judgment over the wealth, their judgment over the desirability of those who entered their sanctuary. James wants the readers to examine these actions because he wants them to account for whether or not these actions, all of their actions proclaim belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether their actions are clinging to old definitions of defilement or have been set free by Christ. Whether these actions conform to the Gospel. James does not allow the reader of his letter to answer this question themselves, he pronounces them judges with evil thoughts. James says to his reader you judged these based on what was exterior and decided that they were inferior, and this judgement reflects the evil within your own heart, your own defilement, not theirs. But there is good news for this congregation, the old definitions the old separations have been broken down. He is proclaiming to the Church, that they have been freed, they have been liberated, indeed they are under the law of liberty, free to let mercy triumph over judgment.

It is this redefining of defilement along with Jesus’ commitment in the Gospel of Mark to exorcise the demons which isolate people away from their communities, away from their Creator, which marks the overthrow of a world marred in sin and ushers forth the Kingdom of God. And yet all of this stands in stark contrast to the words that Jesus speaks to the woman. Here we find this woman, bold enough to cross every boundary that existed to reach her God, to in her boldness humble herself before her Lord. She is on her hands and knees at the feet of the

man who can heal her daughter of her unclean spirit, the presence inside of her which has defiled her, made her unable to participate in communal life. And Jesus response is biting, He says to the woman, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”. Where is the mercy? In this passage all we seem to find is the triumph of judgment.

As soon as this woman heard about the Christ who has come in secret, she rushes to the feet of Jesus. There is no indication that there was any delay in her excitement to have her daughter healed. There is not even any indication that she waited for Jesus to leave the house she had entered. Nothing is going to stop this woman from begging Jesus to heal her daughter. But Jesus responds by telling her she needs to wait. But this is a different kind of waiting than we are used to hearing God send people on. This is not a holy waiting, a waiting that seems to have a larger purpose. She is told there would be a delay in the fulfillment of her request because of the ignobility of her request. She is told to wait because it would be ignoble to take the food from the children and toss it to the dogs. The indication is that taking the blessing of Christ meant for Israel and giving it to a Gentile would be the equivalent of giving it to a dog. That it would be a waste to toss the bread of life to these unworthy, mangy, dogs. The ethnic slur towards the woman and her people is inescapable, it is not a subtle underlying motivation hiding under a list of other excuses, it is pushed right to the forefront. Where is the Christ who pronounced her gender, her nationality, her ethnicity holy? Where is the Christ who only a few verses later would be cheered by crowds of Gentiles for doing everything well? Why does Mark even tell us this story? We are used to Jesus who can be a bit biting, to the Jesus who would curse the fig tree and drive the moneychangers out of the Temple, but not this Jesus. But this is not the Jesus we know.

By the time Mark is writing his Gospel account of Jesus, it is pretty clear that the group his outreach committee decided to really focus on, is Gentiles, so why include this story? Why

let one of the few appearances Gentiles make include an ethnic slur? The temptation that we all so often fall into is wanting to let Jesus off the hook. We try to add a sweetness to Jesus' words that is not truly there, some translators attempt to do this by saying that Jesus actually meant puppies. Puppies are nice, I am not sure how it makes the passage any better, but it makes us feel better. This certainly alleviates some of our uneasiness about the passage but it fails to grapple with what Christ actually said. It fails to account for Christ who in this moment seems all too human.

The woman responds to Jesus by saying, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs". Within the English translation, it seems that the woman has only responded with a certain level of moxie. But within the Greek, the child is no longer the prioritized child Israel, the child is the immature servant. Her lowering of self, her acceptance of Christ's authority, her acceptance of crumbs, and model for servanthood are what make her response so powerful. These are what stand out in her response, not her boldness, but her acceptance of what can only be described as discipleship. In response to the ethnic slur used against her, by Jesus, she responds not with the wickedness we would expect to come from hatred embodied in their cultural differences, but by affirming her commitment to discipleship. In healing the girl at the woman's request, Jesus is doing more than conceding to a witty foreigner. Jesus is ratifying her claim to what the gospel is, what discipleship is. It is only discipleship which can liberate us and hold within itself the contradiction that defines it "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all".

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily

needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead". James concludes the section we read this morning with these famous words. Long ago the Church made clear within its doctrine that it is not our works that save, that Christ is not a half a savior, and we complete the other half. This was reiterated during the reformation, and today we continue to affirm that in Christ our complete salvation has been achieved. James words have been seen as a challenge to this central doctrine, but that is a misunderstanding of their place within the life of the Christian Church. James does not call us to work for our salvation, to in some way earn it. James is calling the Church to respond to God's grace, to live in the freedom that our salvation gives us. James is calling the Church not to give lip service to redefining of defilement that Jesus gives. We cannot simply tell people we no longer see them as dogs, but continue to deny them community.

We have been given this faith, this incredible faith in the Gospel which has freed us to worship and enjoy God, in ways inside and outside of the Church sanctuary, which pronounces an end to the world we knew. And we are given this world redefined, redeemed, renewed in grace, and we are told the faith we have been given has life. The faith that we have been given is not something that can simply be believed, it draws out of us responses to grace. It does not allow itself to be dead, because our faith is given by the Holy Spirit, which gave life to Christ, which gives life to our churches, which gives life to broken and separated peoples.

Within the short stretch of passages in Mark we all end up offended by Christ. We are all left dumbfounded, challenged, even angry with the Jesus that we encounter. All those who find Jesus' definition of defilement and the new world it calls into existence too hard to swallow along with those who find Jesus' use of a slur unimaginable. So often we want to place Jesus into one of our easily defined and identifiable boxes, conservative, liberal, pious, anti-religious, pro-

this, anti-that. We do it all the time, we justify ourselves by saying that this is what Christ would be. Our actions are defined by something other than the Gospel, and we justify ourselves by saying that is what Christ would want. We label actions apart from our faith as discipleship. And then we find passages that challenge us, upset us even. We find a Jesus who refuses to be defined so narrowly. We find a Christ who will not be made simple.

We can ask why Jesus would do any of these things which become difficult stumbling blocks for us. I do not have an answer for why Jesus would speak to this woman this way. The question we can ask ourselves is, the question we must ask ourselves is, whether we can follow Jesus, this man who frustrates our expectations, who offends our sensibilities, who was offensive enough to die by crucifixion. If we are able to see this Jesus who offends us so spectacularly so, and follow Him to the cross. For Mark, part of the complex understanding of who Christ truly is, is His repulsiveness. The actions which make us cringe. These actions are as much who Jesus is as each miracle, each feeding, His death and resurrection. Jesus frustrates every one of our attempts to place Him within a box, and as difficult as some passages are, if we ever get to the point where we can read Mark without being offended, then Jesus has probably been domesticated and His Gospel has been neutered. And Jesus refuses to be domesticated.

Your life in Christ will frustrate you, it will challenge you, but through this encounter with Christ you meet your savior, and that is certainly Good News. Through this encounter you are given faith that can never be dead. Through this encounter you live a life no longer defined by your works, your accomplishments and failures, but by the God who came to pour out grace into your life.