

September 9, 2018
Columbia Congregational Church
Rally Day
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 146, Mark 7:24-37

Be Opened

The Psalm is full of praise. It is a song of praise for God's creation and steadfast love, a love that brings wholeness to those who feel rejected, outcast, inadequate, or different; praise to God who cares for the stranger, the hungry, and the poor. And the reading in Mark lifts up two such individuals, those considered "unclean" by Jewish law, and Jesus was a Jew by birth and training.

But before we dig into these stories in Mark, it is helpful to put them in context, something that is sacrificed when we stick strictly to the lectionary. These two healing or miracle stories, along with a couple of others stories, are set between two stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes.

The first time Jesus feeds a large crowd is the wilderness still in predominantly Jewish territory, so Jesus is ministering to the people of Israel. When all had been fed, there were enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets, representing the number of tribes of Israel. At the beginning of the 7th Chapter, Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees because some of his disciples were eating without first thoroughly washing their hands as was the tradition of the elders. Jesus responded by first accusing the Pharisees of putting human precepts before the commandments of God. He then explained that it is not what we put in our bodies that defile us - after all, it all passes through our system - but it is what comes forth from our hearts that defile us: our actions and our words. Jesus declares all foods clean (7:19). Our reading of the two healings of outcasts follows this declaration, and then in chapter 8 we have the story of Jesus feeding another crowd of people, only this time we can presume from the location that they are predominantly Gentiles. So you see the movement of the scripture: Jesus' ministry was initially to the Jews but then expands to include the Gentiles.

With these things in mind, let us look at this morning's reading.

Jesus has moved on from his confrontation with the Pharisees and teaching the crowd the truth that all foods are clean, and seemed to need some time away from the press of the crowds hungering for healing, miracles, and teachings. He crossed into Gentile territory and tried to find refuge in a home.

As this summer comes to a close, I think we can all agree that time away from daily responsibilities is necessary from time to time. This past Sunday I worshipped at the Lebanon Congregational Church. I like visiting other churches when I am on vacation, in part to be able to sit in the congregation and be nurtured, and in part to see how other faith communities function. Though I expected, even hoped that I would be noticed as a visitor I thought I would not be known. I received a friendly handshake and welcome by the greeter who handed me the bulletin. I found a seat about 1/3 of the way up toward the pulpit and sat half way into the pew. There were some people already seated around and some were chatting with one another, but like it is here most people entered in the last couple of minutes before the service began. A vivacious woman came over to me, introduced herself and welcomed me, asked if I live in Lebanon and when I told her I live in Columbia she launched into praise of our church's great breakfasts, including a detailed description of the foods we offer. I suspect she had identified me, but I maintained by efforts at anonymity. I just wanted to be a guest.

Jesus did not succeed in his efforts of finding peace and quiet. Clearly word about his healing powers had spilled over into these Gentile lands. The Syrophoenician woman crossed the social boundaries for love of her daughter. She, a Gentile and a woman on her own, not only entered the Jewish household but also, and more significantly bowed before this Jewish man and touched his feet, defiling Jesus and shaming herself and her relatives as she begged for the healing of her daughter.

Jesus' response is "curt, cold and cutting"¹ and disturbing for us to hear. It is a riddle that clearly refers to her as a dog. Yet again context is important. In Tyre, the Gentiles were wealthy and lorded over the Jews, who often were impoverished. It was common practice for the Jews to refer to the gentiles as "dogs", but it offends us. The

¹ Homiletics, Sept. 7, 1997, Commentary

gentle, generous and compassionate Jesus seems to have morphed into a bigot. But, as I said, it was a riddle in a place where speaking in riddles was common.

While we react to Jesus' harsh words, the early followers of Jesus would find Jesus healing the foreign child far more shocking.

The story is about a mother's love that will go to any length for her child, even humble herself before a stranger. Most parents would do the same today. It is not her faith, in the limited sense, that makes her child well, but her love with all the persistence that engenders. It is this same mother-love that is at the heart of God's love. She responds to Jesus' harsh words with her own wit and desperation for her child's healing. Jesus' heart and mind are touched by this love and he steps beyond the cultural boundaries that are so clearly depicted here. The woman's response to his riddle opens his "own vision to a new inclusiveness of all God's children in the gifts of God's grace."² His priority remains for the people of Israel, but now he is opened to the inclusion of Gentiles. She accepts this priority by accepting the mere crumbs from Jesus.

Jesus had declared all food to be clean. Now he declared all people clean and acceptable at the table. It is persistent love that causes the healing of the woman's child. Indeed, it is the outsider who "teaches Jesus, that social conventions should not stand in the way" of our love (FOTW, Loye Bradley Ashton,46).

The final story included between the feeding of the multitude stories is about a man who is brought to Jesus because he is deaf and has a speech impediment. We need to remember that in the first century physical impairment was viewed as the consequence of sin, so those with limitations or deformities were outcasts, without status. Thus they were "barred from social and religious institutions"³ and excluded from community. (Thank goodness we have made some effort to move away from that thinking.)

There was none of the resistance by Jesus that we saw in the first story. Rather he took the man aside and gives the man his ability to hear and to speak, bringing him back into community, not only healing him physically but also spiritually.

The Syrophenician woman came before Jesus to get healing for her daughter. The deaf man was brought by people who wanted desperately for him to be healed. Being

² Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, September 9, 2018.

³ Amy C. Howe, in *Feasting on the Word*, p 46

deaf he might well have had little knowledge of Jesus. Yet Jesus responded to the petition of those who cared. Is this not why we lift up prayers on behalf of others? Indeed, Scripture encourages us to do so (Luke 18: 1, 1 Th 5:17, Eph 6: 18).

The entire section, beginning with the feeding of the crowd of Jews gathered around Jesus and ending with the feeding of the Gentiles, demonstrated that our cultural expectations and social rules can get in the way of living a true Christian life. God's law is not intended to divide us, cause us to build walls against the other, or to allow for one group to feel superior to another. God's law is to bring us together, honoring, even treasuring our diversity given through God's love. Oh that Jesus would come to the people of this world, put his fingers in our ears and touch our tongues, that we might truly hear one another and communicate in truth and work for peace and justice. We must look to the teachings of Jesus to open our ears, open our eyes, and open our hearts to the changes God's rule proclaims. Be not afraid. Be opened and share the good news.

Let us pray,

“Holy God, maker of us all, you call us to love our neighbors as ourselves and teach us that faith without works is dead. Open us to the opportunities for ministry that lie before us, where faith and works and the need of our neighbor come together in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.”⁴

⁴ Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, September 9, 2018

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