

Proper 18 (15 Pentecost year B) 2021
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
September 5, 2021
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 Psalm 125 James 2:1-17 Mark 7:24-37

Almost two months ago (July 18, 2021), Jesus said to his apostles, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in a boat to a deserted place by themselves.” Before long, a great crowd had gathered. Jesus and the disciples did not get their rest. Jesus healed people; fed a crowd of more than five thousand people, and taught about who Jesus is: the bread discourses in which we delve deeply into what it means that Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus continued teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum; so shocking were his teachings that many followers walked away. The Pharisees challenge Jesus about the Law, and Jesus retorts that they “abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Jesus again tries to get away, to be quiet, unnoticed. He travels to “the region of Tyre.” Until now in our summer readings Jesus has been in areas that are predominantly Jewish; Tyre is a Gentile area; we remember that “Gentile” means pagan, a believer not in the One God, but many (little “g” gods).

Jesus cannot escape. A Gentile woman slips into Jesus’ house of hiding and bows down at Jesus’ feet. Her stance is one of worship, bowing down. Her status is – nothing! She is an unnamed woman, ritually unclean in a Jewish environment, and in every case, property with neither status nor voice. She pleads on behalf of her daughter “with a demon;” probably some sort of physical disorder. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus has healed women (we remember the woman who bled for twelve years), so his interaction with her, while inappropriate in society, is not out of the ordinary for Jesus. The context is new: in a Gentile surrounding, with the woman giving voice to someone other than herself, who has broken into a house and into Jesus’ presence. She has everything to lose. I wonder: would we be so brave? For ourselves? For our child? For our neighbor?

The woman begs Jesus to heal her daughter, who, by the way, is not with her, but at home. I am always (to this date in my life) shocked by Jesus’ response:

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Children are the Jewish people: let the Jews be fed first, for it is not fair to take the Jew’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (huh?)

Jesus is Jewish; he has been teaching and healing in Jewish parts of the ancient world. He has been surrounded by similar followers and coming up against the authorities of the Roman Empire. Maybe Jesus went to Tyre because “no one would find him there;” but he is found. In a more likely scenario, Mark is telling us that Jesus’ ministry has spread from a Jewish world into the whole world – one of Gentiles, pagans, neighbors unknown....

The other word that Jesus uses is a colloquialism equally unknown to us: “dogs.” Dogs was a common derogatory word of the time, and was a word used to refer to Gentiles. It was a deeply hurtful word.

Now we have:

Let the Jews be fed first, for it is not fair to take the Jew’s food – who we know to be Jesus (bread of life, etc.) – and feed it to the Gentiles.

Emphasizing the derogatory nature of the word “dogs” is that the word is more akin to “puppies,” perhaps matching the woman’s “little daughter” – little dogs.

Jesus’ response is deeply problematic. Explanations include that we are seeing Jesus’ humanity; that Jesus’ is testing the woman, and that Jesus’ (gospel writer Mark) is echoing what the religious authorities (Pharisees) would say in order to show us the stark contrast of Jesus’ ministry to all. Jesus came to save the whole world. [The “what do you think?” is a great forum for us – please let me know if you have an interest in exploring the possibilities of this story, and we will do so.]

Some say that the woman changes Jesus’ mind – that Jesus’ belief in his role is transformed by her words:

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

“Sir, even the pagans eat the Jews’ crumbs.”

Everyone eats! Jesus’ ministry is for all!!

Author Barbara Brown Taylor writes

“You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do.” The woman’s faith and persistence teach Jesus that his mission is much bigger than he had imagined, and she opened his eyes to the fact that God’s love and mercy transcends all boundaries.

Whatever the reason for Jesus’ response, the woman wins her case. She is the only person in the Scriptures to win an argument with Jesus. There is immense grace in this story, and the hope for you and I in every despair, is that those without status or voice in society, in our lives, can bring themselves to Jesus: to his love and mercy. Whether or not we changed his mind, it is grace and mercy that wins the day, for Jesus replies:

“For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.” Jesus heals without regard to time, space (the daughter was at home), ethnicity, status – whatever human bounds we may impose. Jesus heals when we present ourselves to him, for ourselves and for others, and call him by name. The time and place may be inappropriate or awkward, our societal place in question – none of this matters. We present ourselves, our souls and bodies, to Jesus.

We are one on the dirt at the foot of the cross.

To the criminal hanging with him, Jesus says “today you will be with me in paradise.” We are promised no less.

Living a life that proclaims “Jesus is Lord!” takes courage. We might need to break through a crowd to see, to touch, to fall at Jesus’ feet. We might need to surprise ourselves in bidding on another’s behalf – at exactly the wrong time, the wrong place, and at a time when we think that we have no voice.

In Jesus’ very next journey, he gave a voiceless man the ability to speak. How did Jesus do that? “he sighed.” Jesus sighed. As the breath hovered over the waters and created, so did Jesus’ breath bring the voice of a man to life. As God spoke everything into creation, God’s breath in Jesus healed.

We are one in Jesus, one in the risen Christ, one body in one faith in the one God.
We will one day what it means that God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.
Come, Lord Jesus!