

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, September 5, 2021

“The Syrophenecian Woman”

Text: Mark 9:24-36

In 2018 I went on a sabbatical to Scotland. While there, I attended worship at the Church of Scotland. In this church, once a month families would get together for what they called “Family Faith Share” where they would share breakfast, learn a lesson, do crafts, sing songs, and finish by attending the end of worship for communion. Every time they gathered, they would learn about a person Jesus met in the four Gospels and share how the person was changed after an encounter with Jesus. I loved that idea and hope to bring it to our Interactive Family Worship someday.

So today in our Gospel, we meet two people of questionable background to a Jewish person ... a woman of Syrophenecian origin and a blind man living in the pagan territory of the Decapolis... the 10 cities. For this sermon, I will focus on the Syrophenecian woman.

The first thing I want to lift up in our Gospel is geography. In particular I want to focus on Jesus' feet. What were Jesus' feet doing in Gentile... non-Jewish territory? He visited the region of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast in modern day Lebanon. Perhaps Jesus wanted some beach time. But if you were Jewish, the Gentile territory of Tyre was a despised area by Jews. People in those areas worshipped multiple gods and had non-Jewish blood... they were considered unclean. Jesus broke boundaries in going there. Mark tells us Jesus didn't want anyone to know he was there. But he couldn't escape notice.

How about the feet of the Syrophenecian woman? She heard about Jesus and found him. She too broke social boundaries too. Her need made her blind to Jesus' race, wealth, and status. She was a woman who was at the end of her rope dealing with her daughter's mental/physical, or emotional illness. Mark refers to her daughter as having an unclean spirit... or demons. Her falling at Jesus' feet and continuously begging him to help signals that she is desperate.

Can you relate to this woman in seeking help from Jesus? What are you begging God for? I can relate to a parent who wants wholeness for her child. What are you dealing with in your home? I know this pandemic has been hard on all families on multiple fronts. I just found out today that two of my former parishioners died of Covid this week.

But what happens next in the encounter with Jesus is disturbing to those of us who like things neat and tidy when it comes to Jesus. Jesus just got done saying it's not who you are, your background, or how you eat or wash your hands that makes you unclean. It's what comes out of you. It's your actions that matter. Did Jesus forget?

Jesus' initial response to the Syrophenecian woman was to dismiss her request... or delay her request at best... and call her a dog... a racial slur used by Jews for Gentiles. Jesus saw his mission initially to children of the house of Israel first... the Jewish people.

But this woman argued with Jesus and won the argument. One of the few in scripture to argue with God and win... essentially saying, "even though you may consider me a dog, household dogs under the table still eat the children's crumbs." She just wanted the crumbs.

I know this to be true with our new puppy, Badger, who when we let him out of his play yard in the living room, the first place he goes is under the table to look for crumbs or spills.

In other words, the woman says, I at least deserve to be treated as well as a household pet. Then from a distance, Jesus healed her daughter. She went home and her daughter was lying on the bed with her demon gone. Jesus, who had the power and privilege was changed by this woman and honored her.

Some scholars try to sanitize this text and say Jesus was just testing her faith. Keep in mind, however, that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. His humanity is on full display here. Because of his Jewish background, language he heard growing up about those Gentiles, and understanding of his mission, Jesus had his mind made up about her at first. He was acting as a first century Jewish Male. But because of her protest, he changed his mind. Thanks be to God, because most of

us are Gentiles, of non-Jewish descent. This encounter changed the trajectory of who is included in the church. We are included in God's embrace because of Jesus.

How many of you have your mind made up about someone and don't want to change? Today perhaps it's people of a different vaccination status, political party, or mask tolerance. You can extend the list. Who do you consider a dog? How does this encounter call you to change?

If Jesus can change his mind about this woman, we can too. He included her in his ministry of healing. His mission expanded that day by listening to her story.

I am convinced that each of us has a story of pain and desperation like the Syrophenecian woman. Her persistence in seeking dignity and healing from Jesus for her daughter is a witness to me. It teaches me to listen to people's stories.

For the church, this text has far-reaching implications for diversity and inclusion. May our feet, our ears, and our words reflect the love of Jesus. May we be as tenacious as this woman when seeking justice for those who are hurting.

May the crumbs we share in communion give us grace and forgive our closed mindedness. Amen.