

REFLECTION

September 8, 2024

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 18

All Saints Episcopal Church, South Burlington, VT

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I'm going to talk today about the messages in the Second Lesson and the Gospel to show the common themes in each.

While the other readings for today tell us to trust in God who fulfills the needs of all, the Second Lesson and Gospel show us our role in this process.

God works through us, but we must be the instruments of his work. In the Second Reading, James gives the example of a rich man who enters an assembly and is treated with great respect while a poor man is sent to sit on the floor where no one can see him. James says this is evil. Also, that the rich oppress us while the poor have been chosen by God to be rich in faith and heirs to His kingdom. So, what does he tell us to do? "You shall love your neighbors as yourselves" for this is the law of God. If you say you have faith but do not recognize and help the needy then you are not fulfilling God's intentions. James concludes his message with a profound statement: Faith without works is dead. Actions, not words, are to be our life plan.

The Gospel reading is very intriguing to me. I chose to concentrate on the healing of the Syrophenician woman and her request for healing for her daughter. I did a lot of research and found many different interpretations of this story. The basic story is that Jesus and his disciples go into the region of Tyre which is part of present-day Lebanon. They want to be alone to rest awhile after a very busy time of preaching and healing. But Jesus knows that He will always be followed by the faithful Jews who believe in Him and His healing powers. Suddenly Jesus feels a tug on his robe and a Syrophenician woman, who is Roman and a Gentile, begs Him to heal her daughter who is possessed by demons. At that time in history, the Gentiles were considered an unclean race.

Now comes the part that gets interesting. Jesus responds to the woman by saying: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." One supposition is that we can replace the word children with "Jews" and dogs with "Gentiles". Let the Jews be fed first for it is not fair to take the Jews' food and throw it to the Gentiles. It would seem like Jesus is being unkind to the woman by calling her an unclean dog. This really upset me, so I kept researching. In the Greek language, there are two meanings for dog: one means an unclean cur and the other means pet. In the Greek translation of this Gospel, Jesus uses the meaning for "pet". So, this is a gentler metaphor. Dr. Marcea Paul, an Episcopal priest in Austin,

Texas says: "When Jesus says: "Let the children be fed first," some believe he is implying that the time is not right, that he may be suggesting that others may be fed in time, but for now his mission is to feed the Children of Israel."

The desperate mother does not back down. She responds to Jesus by saying:” Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She has heard about Jesus and his compassion for others and His way of making the impossible possible and in the end, Jesus heals her daughter. This is very unusual for the time. Dr. Paul says: “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.” This Gospel reading marks a pivotal point in Jesus’ ministry. The Syrophenician woman was instrumental in jump-starting Jesus’ ministry to all people.

So, what is the message to us in these two readings? In the Second Reading, we are told that faith without works is dead. In the Gospel, we see an example of Jesus using His transformational powers in an extraordinary act of faith and good works.

So, let’s BE LIKE JESUS and serve others in any capacity we can. Help others regardless of their race, religion or social status. If we have faith in God, we must be His hands and feet in the world.