**September 9, 2018**

**Mark 7:24-30; James 2:1-17**

This is the story of an outsider. This woman, like many others drawn to Jesus, was thoroughly “other than:” a (1) foreign (2) female (3) Gentile. She was far from the cultural or social Jewish elite, but she knew of Jesus’ reputation. Jesus was a leader, a teacher and a healer. He was a *helper*. And she needed help. She needed help that wasn’t available from the ordinary people and places. Her daughter was sick. This mother was desperate, as parents are when their children need something extraordinary. Before this encounter, the mother likely had countless visits to local healers, embarrassing public scenes, and tearful sleepless nights. So even though the woman didn’t know Jesus, she was willing to reach out on the chance that he might be the one to heal her daughter. Jesus could be the one. She wasn’t part of *his* people (the Jewish people) but what did she have to lose? She believed in something, even if it meant sacrificing everything – her dignity, her time, whatever resources she had. So she left her daughter, found Jesus, and bowed down at his feet. She humbled herself and showed him the greatest respect, groveling down on the ground.

Jesus’ first response was not kind or generous or loving or any of the things which he espoused. In fact, he was gruff and grumpy. He used a racial slur, referring to her as a dog. It was like calling a black man a monkey. It wasn’t nice. It was downright rude. And everyone knew it.

This does not fit the picture of Jesus that many of us carry in our minds. Jesus was not smiling. He was not welcoming. He was not calm or domesticated in any way. Instead of saying, “Come to me, all you who are weary,” Jesus said, “get away from me! **I** am weary!” This Jesus is different from the Jesus we think we know and love. And that difference makes this a difficult story for many people. Some people then think that because this encounter is so different, it must not be true; the story must have been recorded in error. Someone who didn’t like Jesus snuck this past the copy editors. Other people hear this exchange and give Jesus an easy pass. They completely dismiss his reaction, and instead get mad at the woman for stirring the pot. Why couldn’t she just leave him alone? Why couldn’t she keep her mouth shut? She knew her place.

I believe that the woman did know her place. She knew the rules. But she was desperate. And desperate times call for desperate measures. She wasn’t going to let this man – a purported helper – write her story. #metoo So she didn’t back down or run away, but neither did she melt down and beg or have an unseemly temper tantrum. She was smart in her retort. She respectfully repurposed Jesus’ *dis*respectful metaphor. When Jesus said that he came to feed the children, not the dogs (meaning that he came first for God’s chosen Jewish people), she responded, “Yes, sir, and even dogs eat the children’s crumbs.” Those lower on the food chain do get the leftovers from the careless and the powerful. Those who grovel often get something – a crumb or quarter or small pittance. She bowed down at his feet, physically lowering and jumbling herself, reminding him that she needed to be fed that day.

It was a brilliant rhetorical move on her part. She, the powerless, used the language of the powerful. She didn’t demean herself by accepting his metaphor. She didn’t call herself a dog. But she returned his rhetoric to him, advancing the argument on her own terms.

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader followed similar patterns in her judicial work. Her work as a young female lawyer took her head-to-head with male lawyers and judges who didn’t think she belonged in the court room, and thus didn’t want to listen to her. That didn’t deter Ms. Ginsburg. She didn’t approach these people or situations with force. Her mother taught her that “you can disagree without being disagreeable.” So she worked hard. She was kind and collegial, and she did a great job. Ginsburg built clear legal arguments that were also persuasive. In pushing our laws to be more equitable for men and women, she argued cases for men who had been discriminated against. She knew that those would go farther with the male judges and juries and lawyers. She won greater equality for women by using the language and practice of the powerful men. Ruth later said, “Fight for the things you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.”

In this same way, the Syrophoenician woman did not push Jesus farther away in their disagreement, but she drew him closer into herself. She fought for her daughter’s health in a way that made Jesus want to join her.

The powerful establishment told both the Syrophoenician mother and Ruth Bader Ginsburg to let things be... let sleeping dogs lie. People brushed them away as if they were pesky flies, as if they are not worth truly seeing or hearing. But the Syrophoenician woman and Ruth Bader Ginsburg kindly and respectfully persisted as they appealed to the powerful and stood up to the powerful. Despite public scorn, they believed in something. And they pursued something. Even if it meant sacrificing everything.

There are countless needs around us every day. Countless needs and billions of powerless people in the world who need our help. We, as Americans, are the powerful. We have bank accounts and safe homes and clean water and abundant food. We can worship in public. We can pray or not pray in public. But there are many, many people who cannot, who need someone to speak up for them. There are people around the world who survive on our crumbs which trail behind us. Used clothes at Goodwill. Out-dated weapons in third world countries. Pittance charitable contributions. Even dogs get the children’s crumbs.

This story about Jesus is another example of how human he was. Like us, he became exhausted by the demands of life. Without rest and renewal, he couldn’t live into his best self or do what he wanted to do. In that, this story underscores how difficult it can be to follow God and live into God’s hope for the world. The Bible (and Jesus’) larger message is about loving neighbor and welcoming stranger, honoring God by honoring God’s good creation. For us to do this, we must first take time to rest and reflect, so that we can thoughtfully engage the world. We must also silence the judgments we make about others, then actively demonstrate God’s love in the world. We cannot welcome the stranger without meeting their basic needs. We cannot love our neighbor without making space for them. We must give up something of our own in order to practice hospitality. We must let go of the desire to put our own needs and traditions first in order to love and welcome the stranger. But it’s difficult. Even for Jesus. It wasn’t an automatic response for him.

The James epistle spoke to this very point. “You do well if you fulfill the royal law of scripture: love your neighbor as yourself. But if you show partiality – if you choose rich over poor – you commit sin. What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? If someone needs food and clothes and you don’t supply them their needs, how good are you? Faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” We cannot only come to church, then live a life unchanged by the Gospel. We cannot only say we believe, but never pray or serve God. We cannot only pray, but never help our neighbor and love the stranger.

It’s easier said than done. We need constant reminders and a lot of help. Which is why we come to church and pray and read scripture. Just as Jesus prayed to God to help him in ministry, so we must also pray for God’s intervention in our lives. Sometimes that intervention arrives in a package easily opened – an old friend who reminds us how much we’re loved. Other times that intervention arrives in an unwelcome package we’d rather refuse at the door – a stranger who makes us uncomfortable in all that they say and do. The second verse of the next hymn sings, “Teach us, O Lord, your lessons, as in our daily life we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith.” We sing of our struggle to be human, just as we see how Christ struggled to be human. It’s hard work – an uphill struggle each day, searching for hope and faith, trying to love and heal and forgive. But this is the job of the Church. This is the work of the faithful.

As we begin a new school year, as fall programs kick off and we contemplate our church’s future, may we have the courage to speak truth to power, like the Syrophoenician woman and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. May we serve God and fight for what God cares about in a way that will lead others to join us. For this is the kingdom of God. Amen.



