

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday September 9, 2018 Proper 18B
Preacher: The Rev. Christopher McLaren
Text: Mark 7:24-37
Theme: The Quiet Strength of God

Jesus is in Gentile Territory. The last time he was in Gentile territory he healed a man from a legion of demons. The demons went into a herd of 2000 pigs causing them to rush into the sea to their death. The response to Jesus' miracle working power was that they asked him to leave. Thinking that nothing has changed, Jesus is hiding out in a home, hoping for some much-needed recharge time. However, someone is ready for what Jesus has to offer. He cannot escape detection, and the next thing we know, he is in conversation with the most unlikely of people, a Syrophenician Woman.

She is a Gentile woman who is deeply concerned about her ill daughter who is troubled by a demon. She was considered unclean first, because she was a Gentile woman and second, because of her daughter's demonic illness. Her faith is seen in her desperation to find Jesus. The woman, who knows that she has no business engaging the famed rabbi, comes to him, insistent but humble. She throws herself at Jesus' feet and implores him to heal her daughter. As one commentator puts it, "She has what Jesus is always looking for: perseverance, faith and service toward another."

But Jesus surprises us, shocks us even. He says no. And "no," in a way that seems offensive, derogatory and bound by the prejudice of his day.

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

Mark 7:27

For Jesus, there seems a proper order of things. The Wisdom of God is first meant for the lost house of Israel. It would not be right to pass over the children of promise and offer the gift of God's life and love to the Gentile dogs, to the unclean. This seems uselessly harsh to our ears. I find Jesus disappointing here through my 21st Century lens of inclusion.

I thought Jesus was the one always breaking down the barriers, opening up the gates of grace, disregarding the conventional prejudices of the day. Why is Jesus talking down to this brave and desperate woman?

The woman, bless her courage and tenacity, is not phased by the ethnic slur that escapes the mouth of Jesus. She goes toe to toe with the wonder boy from Galilee and schools him in the art of love.

Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

Mark 7:28

The woman will not leave offended. She does not attack Jesus or retaliate for the slight. She restates her request in the terms offered by Jesus. Sir, she says, even now the dogs (she and her daughter) could relish a single gift of God (crumbs) from among the many gifts that are given to the Jews (the chosen ones). The mother is not concerned about being great or being first or being respected. She is serving her daughter. She loves her daughter and wants to see her well. She is willing to become least in the kingdom in order to see that happen. Her posture a deeply spiritual one - **one becomes least so that God can become most**. This is at the core of Jesus' message and the woman is living it out in front of him.

We are meant to be amazed at this woman's spiritual wisdom. We are to be agog at her pluck and tenacity to get Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus is agog at her too. He is amazed at this beautiful Gentile woman whose faith and love are so fierce she will not be dismissed. She will be heard. She will be loved. Here in front of Jesus is an enacted parable of his own message.

The woman's posture of love and resistance unleashes the power of God there in that place, immediately. Her words echo the heart of God. Jesus, who is always wanting to heal, feels the cooperation of the woman with the divine will to heal. The power released is stunning. The girl is healed at a distance. Jesus does not need to travel to her but rather feels within him love overflowing from the divine will and heals where she is at home. The divine Spirit is not confined to space and time. Geography is a human limitation not a divine concern, when there is openness to the Spirit of God. The Syrophenician woman has become least and therefore allows God to become most.

This is a most intriguing story of healing for me. Jesus and the Syrophenician woman meet through a playful riddle about bread and tables and dogs, but it connects them at a heart level, in the inner connections with the loving heart of God and healing power of the Holy Spirit. The meeting of these two alive human beings released the power of God into the world as a healing moment of the Spirit.

This is a story about the power of God to heal to be sure. But there is also the quiet strength of Jesus in this story. Power is explosive and tries to dominate by force. Strength simply holds fast to the truth, knowing the truth will outlast the lie. Jesus while he has the power of God at work within him is more an example of quiet strength. He will not "quench a smoldering wick" nor will he break a bruised reed." Jesus will not traffic in death. He will not participate in the culture of death around him. He was life; and he constantly refused the ways of death. He was strong and patient, he was the meekness that will inherit the earth. Meekness is power under control, strength directed toward a goal.

If we want to understand who Jesus was, it is helpful to see him as one who possessed a steady, gentle strength throughout his life. The Gospel of Mark makes this especially clear. Where does his strength come from? I believe that it comes from his consciousness of being loved by God and being the bearer of the Holy Spirit into the world around him, a world full of pain, suffering and separation. No matter what happens, Jesus knows that he is loved by God. He is constantly conscious of this wonderful truth. And while others try to distract him from this truth or pull him away from it, he clings to it with a tenacious and quiet strength. They try to get him to become angry and react in violence. They try to get him to claim the mantle of a messianic king but he will have none of these things. He stays focused on the love of God resident in his heart, the message that he received at his baptism "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."

But Jesus does not keep this quiet strength to himself. He is constantly trying to give it away to others. He thinks nothing of crossing the boundaries of Jew and Gentile, man and woman to find the responsive hearts he desires. Wherever people accept him he resides, wherever people reject him he moves on to other possibilities. He follows the responsiveness of people, if one Gentile can open her whole heart to God, then others can as well and he will travel a great distance to find them. Jesus is driven by what gives him life, namely giving love and life to others. (Shea)

This reminds me of something from family systems theory and therapy practice. There is a theory about steady strength within families. Someone recently remarked to me that they were not sure that there were really any functional families, that all families are dysfunctional and I suppose to a certain degree that is true. But in seriously dysfunctional families there is often, surprisingly one person who is remarkably healthier than others. If that person can hold onto her or his own health, the sparks of life and health in the other family members may slowly be revived. But if the healthy person gets sucked into the sickness, the family unit will enter more deeply into its own destructiveness. This is a surprising testimony to the power of one. But really it is about the strength of one, the steady gentle demonstration of health that refuses to participate in the sickness. I'm sure that each one of us can think of a situation or place in which this theory instructs us to maintain health through a dogged and quiet strength that will not give in to death. How is it that the church is part of maintaining health in a culture gone mad? How is it that as a community faith we can with quiet strength resist the forces of death and chaos and alienation that seems to stalk our nation?

This is also how we are made well. Jesus, the healthy one, holds onto wholeness in a fractured world. He is the strength of God for us here and now. He will not allow us to suck him into our sickness. Rather he brings us into himself. He invites us into life-giving relationship with him. He sticks his fingers in our ears so that we cannot hear the noise of the outside world and are guided into the spiritual center of our heart. He spits on our lips, placing his Spirit within us. He connects our center to his center which is open to the love of God. He helps us to realize that we too are beloved. He leads us through his own life and death into a place where we can become least so that God can become most. He offers us

his quiet strength with which to resist the ways of death all around us and the love of God which holds us and leads us into life.

Don't be afraid to live in this quiet strength of God that is already within you. Rekindle the gift of God within you, then you will have the courage you need. Live in Jesus' strength and pursue health in your life and family with the tenacity of the Syrophenician woman who would be loved, who would have her daughter healed, who knew that God was for her and if God is for us who can be against us. Amen.