

2024-09-08 Jesus and the Gentiles – James 2:1-10; 14-17 and Mark 7:24-37

Some of you might remember that I preached about Jesus and the Syrophenician woman 2 ½ years ago. It was February 27, 2022, and it was the final sermon in a series on love. But that day, I used Matthew's telling of this story and it wasn't paired with any other scripture text – it was just the passage from Matthew. This story showed up again for today because it's in the Revised Common Lectionary. And on this particular day, the lectionary reading options include Psalm 146 that was our Call to Worship, some random verses from Proverbs that I opted not to use and these two passages – from the epistle of James and the Gospel of Mark.

The two tellings of this story (in the two different Gospels) are a little different in the details, but it's clearly the same story. It's always interesting to me to consider why the lectionary editors pair certain scripture texts together. Sometimes there's an obvious thread that stitches them together but sometimes you have to search pretty hard and the connecting thread seems really thin.

So, I decided to try to look at these two texts together and see if I could figure out why they were suggested to be read and preached on in the same service. I'll come back to that.

Have you ever had the experience of loving something or someone so much that you just can't imagine having enough love left over for anything or anyone else? I remember when I was expecting my second child – she is just 20 months younger than the first – and being a little nervous about that. What if I just didn't have enough love or patience to go around? What if I really couldn't muster any more affection or energy or hopes or dreams than I had for my first kid!?

I thought about that when I read this passage in Mark and I wondered if Jesus might've had any of those feelings when he realized that his mission didn't have to stop with the Jewish people. They were his first love, of course, they were his people and he had been sent for them. How did he feel... what did he think when he realized that God's love – through him – was big enough and expansive enough and merciful enough to include everyone? And I mean... *everyone*.

The writer of Mark was not talking about the love a parent has for multiple children which, by the way, worked out just fine in my situation. This is really quite different, because Mark made it absolutely clear that this woman was not only Canaanite (which means she likely worshiped a whole array of gods rather than the One Yahweh God) but she was also a member of the despised, enemy tribe. AND she was Syrophenician which describes her nationality. She was everything, anything BUT Jewish. She was a woman, speaking to a Jewish rabbi without the assistance of a man, and she was the desperate mother of a demon-possessed daughter.

Furthermore, I learned something new this week in my study about this woman that I didn't recall having read before. These outlying regions in Upper Galilee – the regions of Tyre and Sidon – were right on the Mediterranean and they exported lots of produce through those cities. The producers of that food were the local farmers – Jewish, peasant farmers who, generally, were poorer and taxed much more heavily than the wealthier Gentile business people in those port cities. So it's quite feasible that this woman could have been a family member of some upscale,

wealthy business people which might have part of what emboldened her to approach Jesus as she did. And it also might help to explain Jesus' sharp, rude response. No, this is NOT a situation of dividing one's affections between equally beloved siblings. This is Jesus, in all of his humanity, navigating decades of hostility, animosity, prejudice and fear. The last time I preached on this story, I talked about Jesus' boundary-busting love. And his healing of both the Syrophenician woman's daughter AND the deaf man was absolutely boundary-busting. But this morning I'm led to suggest that Jesus didn't get to that point of merciful healing on his own. He had some help – in the form of some pushy, in-your-face, challenges from these “across-the-tracks”, “not like us”, clearly “OTHER” folks.

It seems as if Jesus did not go into this area with the intention of “working”. He went there to get away, to rest, to be in a place where maybe people wouldn't recognize him so quickly and swarm him with their illnesses and requests. Verse 24 says, “... he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice...” The woman takes up most of the airtime in this passage and well she should. But the deaf man with the speech impediment is also important. He, unlike the woman, didn't come on his own, but was brought by a group of concerned citizens, presumably his friends. They brought him to Jesus and begged him to lay his hand on him. Again, not wanting to draw a crowd or do a public thing, Jesus took the man aside, in private and commanded his ears to “be open” and his tongue to be released. In both situations, there is a shift in Jesus' focus, in his understanding of who he is for whom he's been sent.

Now why is this passage (these two stories) put together in the lectionary with James' “prophetic call of outrage” as one commentator put it to quit showing favoritism and treating wealthy people with special favors while the poor can't even find a place to sit? Are you feeling the import, are you feeling the weight of this message?

James was writing to people who were still struggling with the reality of decades of hostility, animosity, prejudice and fear... such basic, visceral, human responses.

In these stories Jesus showed us how to lose an argument. Jesus humbly acknowledged that the woman was right – and the deaf man's friends were right. God's love and healing and mercy and inclusion in the kingdom is for Every. One. And the recipients of James' letter were still trying to grasp that. And we're still trying to grasp that. James' message was, stop talking about being a follower of Jesus if your actions don't show it. Stop talking about being right if you can't humble yourself enough to welcome and befriend those who are different. Any form of discrimination – whatever it's based on – appearances, race, gender, different abilities, wealth (or lack of it), political affiliation, who or how one loves... James is proclaiming, reminding that the church is supposed to be a “kingdom” made up of just such inconvenient, unacceptable and incompatible people who believe and want to follow Jesus. That's the singular criteria. And when any of these folks can't find a place in a church that claims to follow Jesus, that church has lost its connection to Jesus.

This is a hard-hitting, convicting message. I don't think any of us can dare to dismiss it. But it's hard. It demands so much humility. I invite you to humbly respond by singing and praying the words of hymn number 644, asking for Jesus' healing of our every ill.