

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 8, 2024

Introduction to themes for the day and for the season

As we read through Mark's Gospel this fall, we'll find the pace of his narrative slows at the same time the action intensifies. We'll also be pitched headlong into difficult questions we can only partially answer. May God's faithfulness sustain us, confounded as we might be, as we seek to follow Jesus.

Prayer of the Day

Gracious God throughout the ages you transform sickness into health and death into life. Open us to the power of your presence, and make us a people ready to proclaim your promises to the whole world, through Jesus Christ, our healer and Lord. Amen

Gospel

Mark 7:24-37

24From there 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, 25but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 28But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." 30So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

31Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Sermon

What is Jesus up when says it's not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs? Evidently enough preachers are stopped in their homiletical tracks that Working Preacher's Dr. Karoline Lewis counsels us to take a breath and pay attention to what lies at the heart of this part of the story—healing.

Sorry Dr. Lewis, I can't jump straight to the healing part of the story as much as I want to. Wouldn't it be great if Jesus didn't spout off like that and just healed the girl already? Dr. Alyce McKenzie from the Perkins Divinity School says if we take out the conversation, we miss out on powerful Gospel that Jesus brings healing and salvation to everyone.

Dr. McKenzie's "what if questions" lead us first to appreciate this quick-thinking mama's chutzpah. What if she accepted society's view that she was the wrong gender, the wrong race and the wrong religion to approach the rabbi? —quick skip to the end of the story; the girl's healed, she's fine!

What if Jesus spared us those harsh words carrying a dehumanizing metaphor about dogs eating bread meant for the kids? We'd miss this amazing woman's courage and on-point response. Society might consider her the wrong gender, race and religion and here she is fiercely advocating for her daughter and she's right on. Jesus knows she's right and he praises her for it.

I have another 'what if'... What if Jesus and the woman in cahoots here? What if they are a tag team debunking conventional wisdom that seems bent on setting up a world of insiders and outsiders?

Dr. McKenzie's research indicates that Jesus is most likely quoting a popular slogan of the time. We can't see the look on his face or hear the tone in his voice, but I would like to think air quotes were involved. Together, Jesus and the woman clap back at the notion that there's such a thing as the wrong gender, wrong race, or wrong religion. Jesus sets it up, and the woman spikes the punchline. Even the stray dogs get crumbs. And a little girl gets healed because her fierce mama puts herself out there. This so-called three time outsider sees in Jesus what many insiders don't.

By quoting a most unworthy meme and affirming the Canaanite woman for debunking it, Jesus self-reveals as a Saviour for everyone. All means all.

We have a long way to go in Mark's Gospel before we hear someone proclaim Jesus as Son of God, chosen to bless and the world. And guess who says it—the Roman centurion who is part of Jesus' execution detail. In God's economy not even the so-called outsider is beyond God's notice and love. amen