

## **James 2:1-10, 14-17**

<sup>1</sup>My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? <sup>2</sup>For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, <sup>3</sup>and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," <sup>4</sup>have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? <sup>5</sup>Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? <sup>6</sup>But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? <sup>7</sup>Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

<sup>8</sup>You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>9</sup>But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. <sup>10</sup>For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it

<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

## **Gospel Mark 7:24-37**

<sup>24</sup>From 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, <sup>25</sup>but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup>Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup>He 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." <sup>28</sup>But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup>Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter." <sup>30</sup>So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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

## **Tired in Tyre September 9, 2018**

Jesus was exhausted. All he wanted was a good night's rest, a hot meal, a quiet place to collect his thoughts, a place to pray. Things were moving so fast and the needs of others so great. He wondered if he could do it. He might have been having some doubts and fears. He was tired of trying to enlighten the religious leaders and nobody seemed to want to listen. He came here to Tyre because it was just on the outskirts of the Jewish community. "Gentile land," is what they called it, right along the sea. He was hoping he would go unnoticed for at least a couple of days. Man, he was so tired. But someone spilled the beans. Maybe one of his followers let

it slip while they were at the market buying things for dinner. Maybe someone asked if they were new in town and they let it slip out that Jesus was staying down at that little bed and breakfast nook down at the end of the village. Maybe they just saw Jesus strolling through town after dark. Word got around pretty quickly after that. And suddenly there she was. Who let her in the house? How did she get past all the disciples who usually screen his calls? Why is she kneeling and begging? What will Jesus do? And then we have one of the most disturbing encounters in the gospels where Jesus calls this poor desperate woman, “a dog” who is not worthy of God’s attention or care. This is not the loving Jesus we have come to expect, and it can throw us for a loop.

We often forget that Jesus was human. That he had feelings and reacted to things in the very same way that we do. He also had to grow up and learn things. He didn’t come with an already fully developed sense of his divinity or of how the universe worked or the fullness of God’s vision. He had to grow into it, just like we do, and our story this morning is one of those moments.

Now, Jesus, like it or not, is a man of and for his time. It has always been understood in Judaism that salvation comes first through the Jews because of God’s covenant promise to them. Jesus knew this in his bones. We hear it throughout the biblical narrative, “Blessed to be a blessing, roots and branches, the branch of Jesse, just to name a few.” Jesus was a Jew and he understood his place as the Messiah for his people. So, his response, while abrupt and offensive to our gentile ears, is not without context. And those who heard this story probably would have understood the insult and the context. ‘Others’ were often considered to be ‘dogs.’ I’m sure we do the same to many of the ‘others’ in our own culture. Just turn on the news.

But why is Jesus so rude? Did he have any sense of how hurtful his words would be? Talk about lousy bedside manner. It all seems out of character for Jesus who has been surrounded by faithful strong women in his life and ministry. And of course, we have no idea the tone of his voice or the demeanor on his face. He could have been smiling when he said these words, or he could have sounded like an old testament prophet. We just don’t know. And maybe he was worried that if he spread himself too thin he wouldn’t be able to help his Jewish sisters and brothers. But it all seems very odd especially since he had been saying from the beginning of his ministry that he had come not only for his own family but for those outside the family. And he also just got done telling the people that it isn’t what goes in your mouth that matters but what comes out of it. He might need to listen to his own sermons! All that being said, Jesus was not only a bit of a jerk, but he was wrong, and this woman is about to set him straight.

Now this woman is bold, tenacious, sacrificial, willing to do whatever she needs to do for her child. I know some women like her and if she is a dog, she is a Bulldog! She is a Pit Bull for love’s sake. A great role model for us all. And she grabs hold of Jesus and won’t let go. She reminds me of Jacob when he wrestled with the angel. “Bless me! Heal my daughter! I won’t let you go until you do!” Oh, that we had such boldness. By her faith and tenacity, she actually challenges Jesus to have more faith himself.

Professor of preaching, Karoline Lewis said in her commentary that, “The Syrophenician woman tells Jesus, “Guess what, Jesus? God said yes to me. God said yes to me when God tore open the heavens. God said yes to me when God decided to show up in the wilderness rather than in the temple. God said yes to me when you came *here* instead of spending all your time in Jerusalem. It’s okay to be me, so get over yourself, Jesus.”

And guess what? Jesus changes his mind and heals her daughter. He heals this woman’s child who would be considered a dog, an unclean one, a sinner, unworthy of God’s love and in doing so he sends a clear message to all who could hear and understand that the kingdom is even bigger than we thought. That this story and the one that follows it speaks to Jesus’ awareness and compassion for those outside the circle of his immediate Jewish community. That God has called him to an ever-expanding circle of Love and inclusion that may have even surprised Jesus.

And I think that's what we are called to do as well. And it begs the question, "Who are those that you consider unworthy of God's love, grace, and mercy? And perhaps a little more pointedly, "Who are those that you consider unworthy of your love, grace, and mercy?" Who are those who are begging to be healed, fed, seen and named, comforted, included, clothed, housed, employed...all those 'others' outside the circle of your familiar family or prescribed beliefs? And what will be your response?

I only have enough for me and mine...

You're not my problem...

You're not my kind of people...

If you only worked harder...

If you were only Presbyterian...

Who do you need to change your mind about? Who is deserving of God's love? Where are the boundaries or barriers you need to surrender to God? It reminds me of a song I've been singing lately...

*Change my heart O God, make it ever true.  
Change my heart O God, may I be like you.  
You are the Potter, I am the clay,  
mold me and make me, this is what I pray.  
Change my heart O God, make it ever true.  
Change my heart O God, may I be like you.*

And do you get it yet, that we are all the unnamed woman, begging to be included in the promise and covenant of God's love? And do you hear God's response? Close your eyes and listen for a minute and hear what God says, "Yes...Yes...Yes." If we trust in God, we know the boundaries are erased inside and out, life, abundant life, is for us all.

The late Fred Craddock told the story of a missionary sent to preach the gospel in India near the end of World War II. After many months the time came for a furlough back home. His church wired him the money to book passage on a steamer but when he got to the port city he discovered a boatload of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily. These were the days when European Jews were sailing all over the world literally looking for a place to live, and these particular Jews were staying in attics and warehouses and basements all over that port city.

It happened to be Christmas, and on Christmas morning, this missionary went to one of the attics where scores of Jews were staying. He walked in and said, "Merry Christmas." The people looked at him like he was crazy and responded, "We're Jews." "I know that," said the missionary, "What would you like for Christmas?" In utter amazement, the Jews responded, "Why we'd like pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany." So, the missionary went out and used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for all the Jews he could find staying in the port. Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States.

As you might expect, his superiors wired back asking what happened to the money they had already sent. He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews. His superiors wired back, "Why did you do that? They don't even believe in Jesus." He wired back: "Yes, but I do."

Ephphatha! Let those with ears to hear, Listen! Thanks be to God. Amen.