

Sept. 8, 2024                      PENTECOST 16                      St. Andrew's  
Pr 22:1-2,8-9, 22-23; Ps 125; James 2:1-10(11-13)14-17; Mk 7:24-37  
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O God of Grace, open our ears to hear your word for us; open our eyes to see the wonder of your love; open our mouths to speak of your goodness. AMEN

Wow! What a rich selection of readings before us this morning! Our reading from Proverbs has focussed on the importance of just relationships between people, between the rich and the poor. The epistle of James sounds a similar note with a warning against favouring some and ignoring others, and giving us a call to "Love our neighbours as ourselves". He brings it home with the famous line, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead!" And then our gospel from Mark gives us two stories of healing and restoration. So what's a preacher to do? The temptation of course is to try to address all of them at once, but I think you would not thank me if our service today went well into the afternoon!

My default is usually to spend time with the gospel which takes us straight to the life of Jesus himself. So let us focus on our gospel today and as we begin, let me ask you to take a moment of silent reflection and answer for yourself, "What is your image or understanding of Jesus?" How do you usually think of him and how have you come to that understanding? ...

Our gospel today is rather disturbing for it quickly follows on a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees over religious food laws. Mark begins this passage with the words, "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." Two things are unusual – firstly Jesus has left the land of Israel and travelled to the region of Tyre – he has crossed a boundary into Gentile territory. Secondly, Mark tells us that he did not want anyone to know he was there. Was he exhausted after so many encounters with people? Was he hiding for some reason? Did he not want to mix with the gentiles? Mark doesn't tell us, but what happens next is indeed troublesome.

He could not escape notice, and a woman whose daughter is trapped in deep darkness – the gospel calls it an unclean spirit – enters the house and falls at Jesus' feet. Mark tells us that she is a Gentile woman and the woman begs for him to heal her daughter. To Israelite ears that is appalling. She is a woman and an outsider; and this Gentile has the audacity to seek Jesus out and ask him to heal her daughter. Now hear again what Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Did he just call her or her daughter a dog? ." It's so unlike the Jesus who said "Let the children come unto me." Even if we recognize that from the Israelite point of view Gentiles were considered to be as unclean as dogs, his language is harsh. Christians have struggled with this for centuries. Some suggest that he was simply testing the woman; others say that he was saying that the time had not yet come for his ministry to extend to non-Israelites; still others emphasize his humanity and stress that he was tired and did not want to be disturbed and lost patience. I will leave you to ponder that at your leisure.

What happens next is where the heart of the good news is to be found. One writer has said, "This is where the gospel goes to the dogs!" The woman is not deterred by Jesus' words to

her and replies, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It is a plea for inclusion and compassion and Jesus hears her. I would like to imagine the look on his face at this moment. It is not clear whether Jesus changes his mind, or whether he was waiting for a sign of the woman's faith. Mark doesn't tell us, we only hear that Jesus commended her words. And he sends her home, saying that her daughter has been healed. In the gospels the healing stories are always signs that the messiah has come and the age of God's new reign has begun. The astonishing thing about this story is that Jesus has just stepped across the traditional boundaries of faith and responded to this Gentile woman. If she can receive the healing presence of God, then who could be next? Where would it stop?

And Mark tells who's next. This time Jesus makes a loop north through the region of the Decapolis or ten cities, before returning to Galilee. He is still in Gentile territory. While there, the crowds bring him a deaf man who could not speak. Jesus takes the man aside and using only gestures and symbols so the man could understand, spat on his own hand and then touched the man saying "Be opened". It sounds rather crude, but it helps to remember that saliva was understood to have healing qualities. And immediately the man's ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. All who saw it were astonished! "Be opened." There is a deep truth that all of us need to be open in order to receive what God has to give. We need to be open to see and to hear what God is doing amongst us and within us. We may need to be opened in order to see beyond the boundaries of our own assumptions, our well-developed ideas, or treasured conclusions. And we may need to be opened in order to speak about what we have discovered.

Where will it stop? Mark tells us that it won't stop, because even though Jesus tells the man and his friends to tell no one, the more he insisted, the louder they proclaimed the news. The amazing news of this boundary breaking, God-bearing man would spread far beyond Galilee even to the ends of the earth. God in Christ calls all people – young and old, rich and poor, wise and foolish, men and women, from all genders, cultures, backgrounds and circumstances. And God has called each of us. We who gather at St. Andrew's today have heard it. We have heard it in the pages of scripture, in the midst of worship, and we have heard it in the prayers of the Eucharist. We have heard it resound in our lives in many different times and places. Jesus crosses all the boundaries which life constructs, bringing good news, bringing his healing presence, and gathering us into his kingdom - even now.

This fall we join with churches around the world in marking the Season of Creation. It is a time to consider God's care not only of human beings but also God's care for the whole of creation and we are invited to consider how we might become more conscious stewards of the earth and caregivers of the natural world. And we do so, not simply because the earth is crying out for our attention, but because we are disciples who have seen God's care for all that God has made in the face of Jesus Christ. As Alida said in the announcements, watch our newsletter for ways to connect with others in the coming days.

So let us pray once more: O God of Grace, open our ears to hear your word for us; open our eyes to see the wonder of your love; open our mouths to speak of your goodness. In Christ's name we pray. AMEN