

Sermon Title: "Syro-Phoenecian Lives Matter"

Scripture Lessons: St. Mark 7:24-37

Delivery Date: 9 September 2018 – College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa, OK

{Note: I do not write a manuscript for my sermons. At the request of some, I am here sharing some of my reflections and recollections on what I preached on Sunday as I review my preparation notes. So, there may be new thoughts here and omissions from what you recall I preached. I offer this in the Spirit who guided my preaching and your hearing on Sunday.}

This passage is one of the most fascinating for me. It comes as a transforming moment in the life of Jesus from an unexpected source. We are told, just prior to this passage, that Jesus had had a difficult conversation with the pharisees about tradition; he then talked with his disciples about it is what comes out of a person's mouth that can defile, not what goes into a person.

Jesus needed some lone, quiet time; it seems implied in the Scripture that he went by himself to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Interesting, also, that the region of Tyre was primarily a Gentile community. Evidently, the social connections passed the news around that he was there. Immediately after a Syro-Phoenecian woman heard this, she came to the house and fell at his feet.

This courageous woman crossed many traditional boundaries in approaching Jesus. Jews considered the Syro-Phoenecians as enemies, as Gentiles, as the Other. She was a single woman approaching and speaking to a man. Yet, her compassionate need for her daughter to be relieved of an unclean spirit drove her to the feet of Jesus.

Jesus, a Jewish man who had been schooled in traditional religious schools, held many of the traditional cultural perceptions and affirmed them. So, when this woman begs to have him cast out the demon in her daughter, Jesus responded with a generally accepted statement: "Let the children be fed first; it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Hmmm, Jews considered Syro-Phoenecians as dogs, unclean, less than human beings and Jesus gives the standard party line to this woman. She responds, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

She was calling out Jesus. Where is my good news? When will the goodness be good enough for my daughter and me? She recognized that the good news was here somewhere, latent and waiting to be shared. I know it is here and you already have it. Let it come to fruition! Preach and share good news with me! What an affirmation! What a challenge!

Surely Jesus paused a moment as he contemplated what the woman had said. He then said, "For this word, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." In his response, Jesus used the Greek word, *logos*. Recall the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John: In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God and the *logos* was God. "For this word," Jesus told her. Jesus heard God's voice in the Syro-Phoenecians woman's reply.

In this instance, Jesus' understanding of his mission suddenly was expanded beyond the Jewish community. God revealed, through this woman, a universal compassion and grace. Jesus permitted this woman to teach him of a larger mission, to destabilize his bias and entitlement, to break through his prejudicial boundaries and to realize that God's compassion is enough to go around to all people.

Jesus, after this personal spiritual experience with God's Spirit through the Syro-Phoenecian woman, leaves the region of Tyre and heads toward the Sea of Galilee – all Gentile regions. As he journeys, folks brought to him a deaf man with a speech impediment and asked Jesus to lay his hand on him. This man, in my thought, is a Gentile. Because of his recent experience and enlargement of his mission, Jesus takes this man aside from the crowd and with some anxious confidence sticks his fingers in the man's ears, spat and touched the man's tongue.

Then there is this wonderful moment before Jesus brought healing to this man. Scripture tells us, "Then looking up to the heavens, he sighed." Perhaps in that sigh, Jesus is saying, "OK, Father, I get it. I'm listening and am trying to be open. I hear you and am working on it." Then he shouted, "Ephphathah!" which means "Be Opened." And the man immediately was able to hear and speak plainly.

Both Jesus and this man have experienced opened ears, opened understanding, opened community in which to share the Good News. Jesus learned the importance of listening for God's word from vulnerable people, people different than himself.

Then Jesus told them to not tell anyone; yet they more zealously proclaimed it. Unfortunately, we too often settle for lukewarm, tepid confessions instead of being zealous with telling the Good News of the Gospel.

(As aside, I believe the College Hill community needs to consider how we can be the Syro-Phoenecian woman to the rest of the Body of Christ. Too often the voice of the Body of Christ, the Christian community, spouts judgmental, arrogant, traditional Biblical literalist non-sense, just as Jesus was quick to tell the Syro-Phoenecian woman. Progressive Christians need to confront the rest of the Body of Christ to bring healing, to cast the demons out of it. And we need to do this zealously, not with timidity.)

Jesus has shown us what it means to be a human Child of God. God is not through with us yet; we are to be opened to expanding ways of celebrating the presence of God's transforming grace and love. We are all saints under construction which requires us to listen for, to contemplate on God's Word to us.

The Syro-Phoenecian woman challenged Jesus with the truth James reminds us: "Faith without works is dead." Jesus heard this and adjusted his ministry to the wideness of God's mercies.

Let us be open:

- To the truth that we continually grow in our understanding and experience of God's call;
- To the wisdom from people nothing like ourselves that will destabilize, challenge, enrich us;
- To listen for God's voice in places and from people we may consider "unholy;"
- To the Good News which stretches our capacity to love.

Amen!

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10 September 2018