

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR WHOM?

Pentecost 16-B

September 9, 2018

Isaiah 35:4-7a, Psalm 146
James 2:1-10, 14-17, Mark 7:24-37

We have not one, but two healing stories in this morning's gospel; and while they seem unrelated they serve as signs that Jesus came, not just for his own people, but for the world. The first healing ties in well with the words from the Letter of James, because the writer speaks of not making distinctions. While the example speaks of how rich and poor are approached differently in the Temple ("your assembly"), the application quickly becomes universal when the writer reminds us of the command to love our neighbors (all of them) as ourselves.

The healing of the deaf man not only echoes the theme of loving every neighbor (after all, he too is a Gentile), but also underscores James' reminder that love means not turning a blind eye to the neighbor's needs. And it echoes the prophet Isaiah envisioning *all* creation restored.

In and of themselves, the healings make a great story. In the first, Jesus tells the woman that her daughter has been made well because of her statement of faith that the grace of God extends even to those outside the covenant people ("even the dogs..."). The problem that remains in our minds is why Jesus sounded heartless and downright rude to the woman who comes to him with the need of a parent who is desperate to help her daughter.

Much as we try, there is no good way to sanitize Jesus' words. If we say he is a person of his time, place, and culture, we suggest that Jesus lacks empathy for "the other" and frankly, from our vantage point, he sounds bigoted. If, as I've suggested in the past, Jesus speaks the ugly words of his culture so that they can just hang there, to convict themselves of their own cruelty, then it would appear that Jesus is treating the woman as an object lesson, rather than as a human being and child of God.

It's been said that when Jesus has an encounter with a woman, it marks a turning point in his ministry. In this case, the eyes and ears that are initially being unstopped seem to be those of Jesus. In other words, his ministry—that initially focused on his own people: the lost sheep of Israel—seems to now be calling him outside of those religious and political boundaries, to be seen as Savior of *the whole world*.

If that is the case, then the Syrophenician woman is helping Jesus learn about his true mission—that "her need called even Jesus into a fuller understanding of God's grace." ["This Day and its Readings" in *Sundays and Seasons 2018*, p. 237.] And the result of the encounter is that Jesus' ministry moves outward. Her daughter is healed; and the ears of a deaf man (also outside the circle) are unstopped. Jesus' ministry is moving forward.

Here, the words of the psalmist apply anticipating the joy brought by the God who became one of us: to bring good news, not only to those called his "chosen," but also to the whole world:

Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help,
whose hope is in the LORD their God;
who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them;
who keeps promises forever;
who gives justice to those who are oppressed,
and food to those who hunger.

The LORD sets the captive free.

The LORD opens the eyes of the blind;
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

the LORD loves the righteous.
 The LORD cares for the stranger;
 the LORD sustains the orphan and widow,
 but frustrates the way of the wicked.

Psalm 146

When I see the work of our congregation in the community, I see signs of the very hope we read about and celebrate. Barriers get torn down as we reach beyond ourselves. Emmanuel congregation brings good news to many, even as we strive to live more and more into what it means to be “church” in the Outer Banks and beyond.

I will be the first to admit that it’s difficult for us to hear the gospel and live it out as Jesus and the apostles did as they moved outward from their “safe zone.” It’s a challenge to hear the words of James, and then see if we are as eager to welcome a homeless or disadvantaged or otherwise “different” stranger in our midst as much as would seek to welcome a person of means, or who at least looks and acts more “like us.”

For many years, mission churches in our denomination were located in growing, upwardly-mobile neighborhoods, with a lesser regard for “the least of these.” While it’s less challenging, financially, to locate in upscale places, we are doing better in recent years. The ELCA and the North Carolina Synod are actively seeking out neighborhoods in need as places where the Good News not only needs to be heard, but lived out. Are we perfect at mission development and redevelopment? Hardly. But are we working to live out the gospel? I believe we are becoming more and more of what it means to be a church in mission.

As God’s people who are followers of Jesus we must not only take it on ourselves to help bring about this world’s restoration, but we must also call out those who claim the name of Jesus while robbing from those they have deemed to be “dogs” in order to heap further riches on the ones whom they believe to be “chosen.” Whenever decisions favor one group of people over another, we must ask, “Why?” and then be prepared to *be the change* we call for. A headline I saw just yesterday stated that the US Government was cutting \$24 million in aid to 6 hospitals in the Palestinian region of Jerusalem. I don’t know all the details, but I have to wonder if somewhere the people of Palestine (who are also “children of Abraham”) have been judged to be less than worthy because they are not part of the Jewish population in Israel. Are they worth any less in God’s sight? We must at least ask the question: “Why are we cutting these funds from these people?” What litmus test must they pass in order to be considered “worthy” of help?

Even within our own nation, we still need to ask: Does “liberty and justice for all” really mean for all? If the answer is “no,” then how shall we proceed? Have we sorted some out of “all” whom we don’t believe to be *as worthy*? Why? How do we become a better *people of the Good News*?

Mark’s gospel gives us a few clues. Craig Satterlee writes: “With the help of a Syrophenician woman, Jesus figures out that his mission is bigger than even he thought it was. When it comes to God’s compassion, Israel’s age-old enemies are counted among God’s favorites.” It’s time to get rid of the distinctions. It’s time to bring healing rather than division. [“From a Scholar,” in *Sundays and Seasons 2018*, p. 239.]

Let’s pray and work so that our eyes and ears are opened to a creation that is larger than our little piece of heaven on this coast; and our hands and feet continue to be moved to act on behalf of all in need, especially “the least of these.” God has blessed us to be a blessing to them. Amen.