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Proper 18 Mark 7:24-37

Each one of the four Gospels are unique in their own ways, but Mark seems to stand out among the other Gospels. Unlike the detailed characters and conversations that we encounter in the words of Luke or Matthew, or the personal account in John's Gospel, Mark's story about Jesus is colored by his eagerness to make Jesus known. Mark writes like a man on a mission; a mission to help everyone hear the story about this liberating Jesus. He focuses on the highlights and seems to be writing to the kind of person you or I may encounter on a regular basis, the kind of person who says, "Don't tell me what you believe—I don't really care. I want to see how you live, the way you treat people, what your spirituality looks like, and what you do with your time."

Almost anyone can talk the talk and as James in our Epistle today said, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works." So if God is really a liberating God, then Mark knew we would want to see him liberate. This is exactly what we see included in this week's Gospel reading. These two stories recount marvelous healing events, which double our opportunity to see and proclaim God's power at work in our world, and in our lives.

The Syrophenician woman had everything going against her when she pushed her way into Jesus' presence. She was a woman and a Gentile, a Greek from the wrong side of the tracks. She had no right to engage Jesus in conversation but despite the dictates of custom, this woman does approach Jesus. She is desperately driven by fear for her daughter's life. Some of us may be able to relate to this kind of desperation and fear. She bows before Jesus and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

We would expect our kind, loving Jesus to say, "Why, of course I will save your daughter," but instead Jesus treats this non-Jewish woman with a severity that he has not shown to any of the others who have come to him for healing. This leaves us feeling disturbed by his insulting response to her plea for help. Jesus tells this woman his mission is for the Jews and the Jews alone and he calls her a dog. Many who suffered those words might have crept away but not this woman. She boldly responds, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Jesus' earlier prejudice, a very human response, is now challenged as he comes to understand her challenge, and his insight after her response is perhaps divine. Her Gentile faith takes Jesus by surprise and Mark wants us to see that this encounter calls forth a larger vision of God's mission to the Gentiles. Jesus begins to understand his mission is not to be restricted to the Jews. However unsettling

this exchange may be, its resolution clearly reveals God's love expands beyond all barriers and it reveals that God is compassionate and merciful. The discomfort caused by this story challenges us today to examine how we treat the "Gentiles". How we treat the poor and persons from another racial or ethnic background in our midst. Do we just talk the talk?

The second healing story in our Gospel today is about a deaf man with a speech impediment who is brought before Jesus. The people beg Jesus to lay hands on the man and heal him. Being deaf in Jesus' day was not merely about not hearing or speaking. For many, physical impairment was viewed as the consequence of sin. They were barred from the social and religious institutions of the day because people were afraid of their physical problems. But Jesus sees beyond this man's infirmity. He sees a valued child of God so he takes this man away from the crowd and heals him. Mark tells this story so we will see that Jesus not only releases this man from the bondage of his affliction but he also restores this man to his community. Whenever Jesus healed, he healed not only the body but also the alienation people experienced from others.

Each of these stories of healing includes intriguing details and challenging moments that provide more than enough material for their own sermon. Yet, taken side by side, they present us with two rich and provocative examples of God's power at work among us and they have much in common. They both take place in Gentile territory. The fact that Jesus gives attention and care to persons beyond his own ethnicity challenges us to reach out to others who are different from ourselves. Jesus' example affirms our need to share God's gifts of grace, peace and healing with all people. Another common feature is that the persons who are healed do not approach Jesus alone but are aided by others. Reminding us that we too are to bring to Jesus the needs of others; actively seeking the well-being of those who need help and care.

And finally, in both of these stories we witness something more than just physical healing. There is transformation, a change of heart, and a hope for all of us who have been deaf to God's call to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. There is a call to a higher standard, one in which we hear in these two Gospel stories but also one we heard in the Epistle today. The writer, James, believed to be the brother of Jesus, calls us to the standard of agape or divine love. James challenges us rich or poor, to show no partiality. In a nutshell, James and the Gospel today both call us to "Love our neighbor as ourselves".

This past Wednesday, I received the call that I and my committee had been waiting for from Texas Refugee Services of Austin. The refugee family that Good Shepherd will Shepherd for the next several months is a rather large family of eleven from the Congo, in Africa. In 1997, this family had to leave their home and flee for their lives because of political persecution. They are Christian,

Presbyterian by denomination and you will be hearing much more about this family in the days and weeks to come. My hope is we will take this opportunity to show this love of God that expands beyond all barriers, to a family who has faced many barriers and will face many new challenges as they begin their new life here in America.

It is not too much to ask us to recognize that there are no walls made of troubled minds, or deaf ears separating us from God or us from each other. There are no external barriers between God and any human being: not race, class, ethnicity, gender, age or physical condition. God is a liberating God and God knows that when we engage in the struggle to show agape love to others we discover a major resource for own mental, spiritual and physical health.

Faith with works, faith with agape love can lift us beyond the confusion and conflicts of our time and help us to see the working of God's hand, building the kingdom of God now and yet to come. We are being called to a higher standard as faithful followers of Jesus. Like Mark, let us also be on a mission; a mission to make sure everyone hears the story about this liberating, healing Jesus. And from James, let us remember that divine love which shows no partiality excels all other forms of love and is our call as faithful followers of Jesus Christ our Lord.