

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Psalm 146

James 2:1-10, 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

09/09/2018

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

24[Jesus] 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. 33He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” 35And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

### **Judgment**

Good morning! Now, the story I share with you this morning is incredibly embarrassing, and it all starts in the third grade. I rode the bus to North School for third through fourth grade. And so, every morning I walked the 150 or so yards to South School where I was picked up by a school bus to take me across town. The first time I stepped on the bus it was a nerve wracking experience. I hadn't needed a school bus before, so the whole thing was new and scary. I can't remember where I sat or how I ended up there but I found myself with Sam, and he and I became school bus seat buddies. Every morning I would wait for the bus, step on up and Sam, who got on at a stop somewhere before I did, would be waiting for me to join him.

Now, as far as bus seat buddies go, Sam was cool, his only flaw being that he ALWAYS seemed to wear Dallas Cowboys stuff, which for me, a Pittsburgh Steelers fan, was despicable. Somehow we negotiated that disagreement and remained friends. And I mean that term loosely, Sam was a year older than I was and so he was in the fourth grade, while I was in the third. So the morning bus ride was the only time we seemed to ever see each other. We managed to call each other friends in the way that kids our age could spend an abundant amount of time together but really know nothing about the other person.

So... imagine my surprise when I found out that Sam had a boyfriend. No, he wasn't gay, he wasn't a he at all. All this time I had assumed that short haircut and sports team affinity had mean that Sam was just Sam. Instead, her name was Samantha! It was like my whole world had been turned upside down! How could I have been so blind to something that was at the core of her identity and instead been blinded by my own quick opinions!

Our texts today, especially the second reading and the Gospel, are wonderful examples of how a bias can lead us to make unhelpful judgments. The second reading reminds me of a scenario that played out in the congregation I grew up in time and time again. First English Lutheran Church in Wheeling, WV is a smaller congregation than what we have here. So, on a given Sunday it was normal to know every single face in the building. The building was also a few blocks away from the Salvation Army, so it wasn't uncommon for someone who was homeless to stop by. When someone new did show up, they stuck out like a sore thumb. Often times when it was someone who seemed to come from below the poverty line the entire room would change. Even as a child I could remember the way that other members would give the person THAT look. You know the one, the look that tells the person they don't belong in MY

church. And so the person would often leave during the middle of the service, unable to bear the sidelong glances of church goers, and unsure of how the service was supposed to proceed, because NOBODY was going to come over and show them how to use the bulletin, they left the building. It's a cold comfort to read from the book of James and see that this is apparently a problem that has been with the church for over two thousand years!

The Gospel lesson doesn't start off any better either. In it we find Jesus, God in the Flesh, comparing a woman to a dog because of her ethnicity. There are two dominant takes on the story. The first is that Jesus was just turning this whole scenario into a lesson. He didn't mean the things he said to the woman, but said them to prove a point, knowing all along how it would play out. The other interpretation of the text is the more uncomfortable one, and in my opinion the more likely one. Jesus simply gets it wrong. Here we see not just Jesus' divinity, but his full humanity played out, simply making a mistake. The text tells us in the beginning that Jesus wanted to be alone. Maybe he was tired and this little exchange just gets the better of him.

But fortunately for us the story doesn't end with Jesus' cruel remark. In one of the greatest comebacks of all time, the woman responds in what I always imagine as a quick-witted response: *27He 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." 28But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*<sup>1</sup> What passion and bravery! This woman's response is for me the turning point of the text, the Good News that God is at work in the most unlikely of places.

We live in a culture that has recently seemed to give permission to some of our worst behavior. We have politicians on all sides demonizing others and often saying cruel, horrible, and

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 7:27-28 NRSV

damaging things. It is never all right to say racist, sexist, and ethnocentric things. When we use categories to define any sort of us vs. them mentality, we forget that God has called us to care for our neighbor.

And don't for a minute think that it's only the most extreme offenders that can be labeled in those hurtful categories. You don't have to be a member of the KKK to be a racist, and you don't need to be a member of the Westboro Baptist Church (if you could call it a church) to act violently towards the LGBTQIA+ community.

Austin Channing Brown says it perfectly in her book *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*:

*“When you believe that niceness disproves the presence of racism, it's easy to start believing bigotry is rare, that the label racist should be applied only to mean-spirited, intentional acts of discrimination. The problem with this framework... [is that it's] a gross misunderstanding of how racism operates in systems and structures enabled by nice people.”<sup>2</sup>*

Fortunately, we don't end there. The other piece of Good News in today's story is that we can change. We don't have to let those ideas rule us. Jesus responds to the woman immediately saying: *“For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”<sup>3</sup>* Just like that his outlook has changed, just like that Jesus overturned a system of Jewish tradition that had put the Gentiles outside of those with whom you could associate. We can change too! I promise you, you do not need to live a life of fear and distrust, a life of anger and pain at those you think can be blamed for complex and challenging problems. You don't need to live like that. We can let go of

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<sup>2</sup>Brown, Austin C. *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*. New York: Convergent Books, 2018. p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 7:29b NRSV

that soul-crushing anger and distrust. Jesus does; at the drop of a hat he changes. It won't be that easy for us, but we can do it. The Gospel lesson today moves from the individual seeking solitude and privacy to an intimate portrait of a man holding another man while he heals him. God has created us that way, created to draw closer to one another in love and support. We can't go it alone, and God has been trying to get us to wake up and realize that for a LONG time. This doesn't have to be our ending... and that's the best news I've heard all week. Amen.