

**Sunday, September 08, 2024**

The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar and Chief Operating Officer*

on

Mark 7:24-37

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## Phoenician Faith

Today we journey with Jesus' mission to Tyre and Sidon, a sometimes overlooked but significant moment in his ministry.

Jesus doesn't go to Tyre and Sidon by accident. These cities on the coast north of Galilee (now in present day Lebanon) these were prosperous, important, and historically intertwined with Israel. According to the Torah, the Hebrew tribe of Asher was given land that bordered Phoenicia and included regions near Sidon. However, awkwardly, the Israelites never fully conquered or integrated the Phoenician cities into their territory, and the people of Tyre and Sidon maintained their distinct identity and autonomy. Although they were strongholds of the ancient enemies of Israel, the connections ran deep. Some were decidedly negative. Queen Jezebel was from this area, and persuaded King Ahab of Israel worship their nature god, Ba'al, and to kill prophets of Yahweh. But other connections decidedly positive. David utilized the help of Sidonians and Tyrians to provide cedar trees for the Temple. In the days of Ezra after the Babylonian devastation, the Jews returning from captivity also sent to the men of Sidon and Tyre for cedars to build the Second Temple.

This region was no stranger to the same forces that beset the Jewish realms over the centuries—ravaged by Persian invaders, and later taken by Alexander the Great, and then Rome. There was a kinship of suffering, and nowadays the Israelites and the Canaanites shared the same enemies.

So out of all the places he could have gone, why did Jesus go there? Earlier in this chapter, which we read last week, he had just faced harsh criticism from the Pharisees about purity and tradition (his disciples weren't washing their hands properly and faithfully). Now think about what he had said in response to the people who came up from Jerusalem to accuse. "There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man." I don't think he is only talking about the ritual impurity or defiling of unclean objects on the outside. I contend that he is certainly bearing in mind unclean people, as they were designated.

Because right after giving this teaching, he makes the trek right into what would be considered extraordinarily unclean Gentile territory. He is bringing his teaching to life by living it out himself.

Tyre and Sidon were renowned for many things—trade of that precious purple dye, wealth, and, interestingly, healing. They were home to the Temple of Eshmun, the Phoenician god of healing.

Now, think about the woman who comes to Jesus, begging for the healing of her daughter. This is no meek act. She is a Gentile, a Phoenician, and she approaches a Jewish rabbi, asking for a miracle that her own gods could not provide. This is a transgressive act from her society's perspective.

This encounter is rich with tension, and the charge in this is what makes it notable enough to make it into the Gospel. Jesus seems to push back at first, saying it's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. That could sound harsh to us. It is true that ancient Israel despised dogs. To compare a human to a dog or to call them a dog was to imply that they were of very low rank, even evil.

But, I should note that by Jesus' time, after a wave of Hellenization spurred by Greek armies, there is evidence that domesticated dogs were a growing practice, even among the Jews.

That still doesn't take the sting out of the imagery. Yet, Jesus is not necessarily insulting her; he's engaging her in imagery and conversation about the very divisions and expectations that exist between Jews and Gentiles, even within the Jewish people themselves. He's pointing out the societal norms that would say she's an outsider. AND I remind you, the same social norms that are just beginning to branding him and his disciples as outsiders. It is almost as if Jesus is saying, what about the black and white world, the world divided into first and last, clean and unclean, children and dogs? Like a good rabbi, he is teaching through questions! What are we to do now?

But this woman—she's remarkable. She doesn't back down. She doesn't argue about her status, getting lost in rivalry. She has a higher concern, her daughter and a faith that transcends the walls that divided them. Instead, she uses Jesus' own analogy and says, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." What faith! And what wit! "If I must be a dog," she is saying, "then consider me a faithful member of the household, not some alley scavenger." In that moment, Jesus recognizes her faith. A faith that sees a path, even a playful path, out of the ties that bind them in this broken world, and Jesus grants her request. Her daughter is healed. Jesus crosses a boundary, just as she did, revealing that God's grace isn't just for the children of Israel—it's for all who seek it, even those considered outsiders and scavengers in the outer darkness.

I want to remind you that Jesus already had suffered greatly in advocating for the people of Tyre and Sidon. In the sermon he gave at the synagogue in his home town, the sermon that nearly had him thrown off a cliff, the sermon that meant he had to escape from his Nazareth with his life, that rage was provoked by the references to scripture that he made, that the good news of healing prophesied by Isaiah was not just for their people, but that out of all the lepers in the world, God's prophet healed Naaman the Syrian, and that out of all the widows in the world God's prophet found salvation in the house of a widow in Zerpeth. And where is Zerpeth? Right in the middle of Tyre and Sidon.

This is a deep theme in Jesus' ministry, one embedded in his faith, reluctantly and uncomfortably, but a theme that Jesus is will to put his life on the line at home and abroad in order to make clear and visible, to inscribe in into history again, Christ shows us that God's grace is not limited by human boundaries, even the boundaries of God's people! We see something similar in the story of the Roman

centurion, whose servant is healed by Jesus. These sort encounters and demonstration of faith from the outsiders, and even enemies, shows the true scope of God's healing power.

After leaving Tyre and Sidon, Jesus travels to the Decapolis, another Gentile region. The Decapolis was a place where Jewish purity laws were not followed. For example, it was a region where people raised pigs by the sea. There, he heals a deaf and mute man—again, an outsider. And, we must not overlook how being deaf or blind was an often-noted characteristic of idols in the prophets and in the psalms. “They have mouths, and speak not; eyes have they, and see not. They have ears, and hear not”

And so, if anyone would deserve to be deaf and mute, it would be a Gentile who worships a deaf and mute idol. And yet, Jesus heals the man and restores him to his own community. And once again, Jesus shows that no place, no people, are beyond the reach of God's love. Whether it's a Phoenician woman from Sidon, a Roman centurion in an unholy army, or a deaf man in the Gentile Decapolis, God's grace reaches beyond any station, and can clean any stain.

But there are so many obstacles and stumbling blocks that are only surmounted by persistence and humility in faith. The Syrophoenician woman didn't let her status as an outsider stop her from approaching Jesus. She was humble, but she was also persistent. She knew that even crumbs from Jesus' table were enough to bring healing for her beloved daughter. And Jesus didn't leave her with crumbs—he gave her the full meal. Her faith brought her into the fullness of God's grace.

Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman expands the picture of where true faith could be found. Reflecting on this, he later rebuked the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and even Capernaum, places that had seen his signs and miracles but remained unrepentant. He declared that if the same mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have long ago repented in sackcloth and ashes. Jesus' experience with outsiders like this woman led him to proclaim that faith can flourish even in places once thought benighted, more so than among those who reject his message. It is not only that the outside doesn't defile, it is the outside that could become a new font of faith and devotion, if we could but see it.

If you read the Gospels and Acts in one go, the expansion of Christ's mission is fantastic. From the Pharisees in Galilee to the Gentiles in Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis, this is the Gospel—God's love, open to all, potentially bubbling out of all, reaching out to heal and restore everyone who seeks it.

As followers of Jesus, how we are called to do the same? How do we look past all the walls that have been erected between us, ostensibly for our benefit, yet ultimately for our ruin, how do we remove our blinders and open up our voices to engage with those who are different from us? To invite everyone to the table, because in God's house, even the “dogs” are welcome. But more than that—no one remains a dog in God's kingdom, even the dogs can be more faithful than us, or to put a finer point on it, it is in seeing this that we see that no one ever was a dog, we were blinded by our faith, earnest but misplaced! Lord, give us a deeper faith that runs deeper than we can fathom. To the foundations of your Creation. After all, We are all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, children of God, invited to the feast, fed not with crumbs but with the Bread of Life Eternal in Our Time.

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