

Sunday September 8th, 2024

Mark 7:24-37

“All I Want is Some Crumbs!”

I have never been one to quote the television show, *The Simpson's*, even after reading the very interesting book by Mark Pinsky, entitled, “The Gospel According to the Simpsons”. However, I couldn't help it when today's sermon subject reminded me of a very funny episode involving Homer Simpson, and his overwhelming obsession with being named employee of the month at the nuclear power plant where he works.

Homer has come to realize, that every other single employee at the power plant has been named, at least once, as “employee of the month”. He has calculated that he is the only one left in the entire power plant yet to be named, and so at the monthly awards ceremony, he is anticipating the fulfillment of this accomplishment. At the ceremony, a hush falls over the assembled crowd of employees, and Mr. Burns, owner of the nuclear plant, reads the name of the employee of the month.

In his scratchy voice he reads that the employee of the month is, “This inanimate carbon rod” which Burns holds aloft and the crowd cheers. In other words, a simple piece of carbon rod is a better employee than Homer. Homer is beside himself with rage; beaten out by an inanimate carbon rod. The episode gets even funnier when Homer ends up on the space shuttle, and after causing a crisis, Homer saves the doomed space craft, by jamming a rod into the air lock to keep it closed. Upon landing, Homer is sure he will receive his just reward for saving the crew, until the media announces that it was, you guessed it, the inanimate carbon rod that saved the day.

I think it is safe to say that none of us likes to be in second place, especially to an inanimate object. Although lots of wives might feel that their husbands prefer playing golf, or watching sports, to spending time with them. The person who is first in any endeavor gets: all the recognition, all the rewards, and in sports, the endorsement deals. The person who comes second, let alone third, or fourth, or lower down, gets forgotten.

Case in point; like many of you, I cheered when Donovan Bailey won his gold medal at the Olympics some years back. It was an exciting moment. Now let me ask you something. Who came in second? Who came in fifth? Nothing causes us more grief than recognizing that I am not number one, not someone's favourite, and will be forgotten and ignored by all but my closest family and friends.

Now, I will let you in on a little secret. Even though the first place, favourite, recognizable person, may receive some rewards in life, they are still prone to the same pain and struggle, all the rest of us are. The rich man and poor man, still face life threatening illness. The first-place athlete, and the last place athlete, still struggle in dysfunctional relationships.

The human condition is no respecter of persons. We all have needs, wants and hopes. The question remains though, whether you are number one or number 100, how do you get what you need. How do you achieve your dreams, especially when so many doors seem closed to all but the most connected and powerful? In Canada, we fear the development of a two-tiered health care system, but we all know that life itself is not equal.

Some people have more opportunities, wealth, or just plain luck.

When Mark chapter 7 opens, there was a prevailing mindset, well entrenched in Jesus' contemporaries, that the Jewish people were number one in God's book. To be fair, it seems quite clear, that there is some truth to this. God clearly set apart Israel, protected Israel, and used Israel for his special plans. It was to Israel that the Law of Moses was given, and it was to Israel that Jesus was originally sent.

God had wanted Israel to be a light to the world, a shining example of righteousness and abundant living in partnership with a gracious God. However, somewhere along the way, Israel's view of itself got twisted a bit. Instead of seeing their mission to lead the world out of darkness, they saw themselves, and called to remain distinct and separated from the world. Through thousands of manmade laws, they drew a line in the sand separating the clean people of Israel from the unclean, which was everyone else.

Mark chapter 7 is an in-depth discussion, in which Jesus seeks to clarify what God's definition of purity really is. Verse 15 reads, "You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do." Then verse 20, "It is the thought-life that defiles you." This theme of Jesus' teaching is prevalent throughout the gospels, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount.

So, this is the background for our passage today, about the Gentile woman seeking healing for her daughter. This story is intimately tied to the discussion of purity preceding it. The passage opens with Jesus seeking rest for himself and his disciples. On the only occasion we have recorded, Jesus leaves the ancient boundaries of Israel, and enters another land, a Gentile territory called Tyre; sometimes called Tyre and Sidon.

Remember, Jesus deliberately entered the land, which Jewish people thought of as, unclean, and full of godless heathens. Many of Jesus' contemporaries, would claim that Jesus was defiled just by crossing the border. Jesus, however, is just too famous, and too well known, even in this Gentile region, and soon people begin to seek him out, to disturb his rest. One of the people who arrived very early on, at the place Jesus' was staying, is a Gentile woman.

This unnamed woman is clearly identified as being Gentile by birth, and Greek in her cultural understanding. Still, she is desperate. Her little girl is possessed by a demon, and if you want to know what that might be like, just read Mark chapter 9 where we read of a young demon possessed boy who suffered from convulsions, and who foamed at the mouth. This woman's daughter was in an intolerable situation.

The woman had obviously heard that Jesus could cast out demons, and so she asks Jesus for his help. Now what happens next, at first seems startling, and even cruel coming from Jesus, but remember, it is in the context of the rest of the chapter. Also, the woman knows how Jews feel about Gentiles, and just getting near Jesus was an accomplishment in and of itself. It also must be said that Jesus speaks to her as a Rabbi would. He uses an analogy to make a point, and to test her faith. The same strategy was employed by Jesus in his encounter with the woman at the well (John 4) and Nicodemus (John 3).

In the ancient world, there were magicians who went around claiming to do all manner of miraculous things.

Perhaps, some had even tried to help this woman's daughter. So, Jesus wants to know how this woman views him. Is he just another traveling side show or is he the Lord of her life. Taking a common scene from the life of the woman, Jesus says this, "It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs." It is an analogy and metaphorical. It pictures a dog sneaking in and stealing the children's food.

Jesus is pointing out that the woman has intruded, into his and his disciple's time of rest, or in the analogy, food. She is required to wait for another day. To wait until the time is right for the Gospel to spread to the Gentiles. The food must first go to Israel. Now, the woman could have gone away disappointed, but the Spirit of God was clearly on her, as she replies with faith and incredible wisdom.

"That's true, Lord; (notice she uses the term Lord) even the dogs under the table are given crumbs from the children's plates." In other words, she recognizes that Jesus' mission is to Israel first, and foremost. She knows she is an intruder, and seen by Jews as a dog, unclean and a heathen. She knows that in the Jewish mindset, she is second best. However, she also recognizes that Jesus has so much to offer.

Yes, let Israel have their bread, but she would settle for a few crumbs, dropped to the ground, as cast offs. Just a tiny piece of Jesus power is enough for her. Dogs under the table eating crumbs are not stealing from anyone. They are simply taking up the leftovers. This woman has declared that she has placed her hopes and her daughter's future in the hands of Jesus. He is her Lord.

Furthermore, remember who is witnessing this interchange, the disciples. Remember back in verse 15, I pointed out last week that Jesus said, "You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do." The disciples, in the very next verse, ask Jesus what he means, and out of frustration he says, "Don't you understand either. Can't you see that what you eat won't defile you? Food doesn't meet your heart, but only passes through the stomach and then comes out again."

So, picture this. The disciples are now in the region of Tyre, surrounded by Gentiles, and now witnessing Jesus confronted by a Gentile woman, who by Jewish thought is second class. She is the very definition of being unclean. Just by being in proximity to her would make them unclean. Jesus little analogy about dogs and children's dinner, would have been perfectly in line with his contemporaries.

Any Pharisee worth his salt would have said something like this, but perhaps with even more venom. But Jesus wants his disciples to see that what makes this woman clean, or unclean, has nothing to do with her gender, or her ethnicity, or even her religion. It has nothing to do with whether she eats pork or works on the Sabbath. It has nothing to do with whether she is married, a widow, or a divorced woman, or single mom.

Sunday September 8th, 2024

What makes her clean, or unclean, is what is in her heart, and what is in her heart is faith, and selfless devotion to her daughter. Jesus doesn't care whether she is one of the chosen ones of Israel but is she one of the ones whose heart had been claimed by God.

I am challenged by a story that Donald Ming tells about a time early on in his time as a minister.

*When I was a young pastor, a drunken man stumbled into the sanctuary during worship one rainy, stormy Sunday night. He was unkempt and smelly. In the eyes of some worshippers, the man was despicable. Even some of the church leaders came to me and said, "Pastor, this man is no good, and he is disturbing our service! Shall we escort him outside?"*

*Thankfully, I heard God's voice speaking to me. I replied, "No. Don't escort him out, but let him come in. God's house is for "whosoever will" (Rev. 22:17) When I extended the invitation to Christian discipleship, this man came to the altar, fell to his knees, and begged God for grace and mercy. He accepted Jesus Christ that night and became a transformed man and dedicated church member.*

*More than that, he brought his entire family to the Lord; all of them accepted Christ as their Saviour and became devoted members.* (Upper Room, July 24, 2001) This story from the gospel of Mark, and many other ones from the life of Jesus, and from our experiences; remind me that sometimes the people who need our attention, are the ones disturbing our traditions, our rest, our rules, and our regulations.

The frightening part of this story in Mark 7 is that if left to the disciples, this woman would have been rejected outright, and the religious establishment of the time would have considered them right on the money for doing so. They would have been good Jewish boys, for avoiding this unclean woman, regardless of her faith, or stated need. I wonder how many broken lives have been lost to God, because we were good upstanding Christians, before we were faithful servants of God.

How much of the dinner, are we hoarding from the truly hungry for God, of this world? Are we reluctant to even pass the crumbs, to those famished for hope and grace? My friend Blake Eady loves to say that evangelism is all about "one starving man telling another starving man where to find bread". The Gentile woman knew where to find the bread, but did she have enough faith to ask for it.

As we read in the passage, she possessed the faith to ask and as we also know, she received. When she returned home, her daughter was lying quietly in bed and at peace because the demon was gone. The message is clearly demonstrated here. What matters in God's kingdom are not who we are. Our ethnicity, our gender, our age, our marital status, none of it defines what God values.

What matters most is who God is, and the faith we possess. Jesus is the Bread of Life, freely distributed to all people. Even a crumb, the tiniest of portions, is enough to: save, heal and restore. But Jesus offers us so much more than crumbs. He invites us to his banqueting table to indulge to our heart's content in his grace, and his love.

Sunday September 8th, 2024

Are you hungry for love? Are you famished for a sense of redeeming grace? Are you the starving person wishing someone would tell you where to find the bread of life? Well, as one who has known the hunger of wanting the satisfaction only Christ can give, I will tell you where the bread is; it's in Christ. I cannot give this bread to you, but I know who can, and he waits to offer himself to you.

Come, ask him for bread for you are most welcome.