

16th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
September 9, 2018

Text: Mark 7:24-37

Theme: A Gentile Woman

Last week at the 9:45 am service one of our younger members came forward for the *Children's Message* and heard me say that the only laws we were to obey were the *Ten Commandments*. After the service she approached me, reminded me of what I said, and then wanted to know whether or not we should obey the laws in our Constitution. My quick response was that it was my hope that the laws established for our nation were grounded in the laws of God and that in our lesson Jesus wanted to make sure we understood that we cannot abandon the commandments in order to maintain our traditions.

In the first part of Mark 7 some the scribes and Pharisees had so fenced in their rituals that there was no room for the people to ask questions about whether or not their traditions were still valid. Jesus opened the gate to allow for some flexibility in interpretation. Now in the second part of Mark 7 Jesus opened the gate even wider to permit all sorts of people in who were otherwise excluded.

We are Christians in the 21st Century so all of our lessons today speak of things we already know but it is good to have reminders. From the lesson in Isaiah we are to minister to those in need and we will do that this afternoon when we gather for the *ELCA Day of Service*. From the lesson in James we are to treat all people with equity so in the church we are careful not to show favoritism. And in the gospel lesson we hear that we are to follow the example of Jesus Christ and surround all people with our love. Since we live in one of the more diverse areas of the country this seems only natural.

Good and obvious lessons (all of them) so I decided we could go a bit deeper today and really study the interaction between Jesus and the Gentile woman. This text has so challenged scholars and theologians that it is often ignored by the rest of us. But it is difficult to ignore the tenacity of this Gentile woman whose little daughter is sick. She hears that Jesus, known to her as a miracle worker and healer, has suddenly and unexpectedly arrived in her neighborhood.

She does what any desperate parent would do. She runs to find him and when she is in his presence, she prostrates herself at his feet and begs him to have mercy on her daughter. But in response our beloved Jesus does not speak to her in a compassionate and loving way (which we have come to expect from him). Instead he insults her by using a phrase that is our equivalent to a mean-spirited and ugly slur.

It is obvious why theologians have put all of their energies into this text. In order to maintain the perception we have of Jesus there must be some logical explanation for his behavior that will somehow soften this scene. Was Jesus using this as a teaching moment? Or was he showing the disciples that even a Gentile woman knew the extent of the gospel message? Or was he just tired and in his humanity he did not think before he spoke the first time? Or was Jesus not fully aware of his own mission until he heard how this woman responded?

Jesus is not here for us to ask his intent so we can only guess at what Jesus was thinking at this moment. But it distracts us from the crux of the story.

In this veiled dialogue the Gentile woman perseveres. She does not seem to be flustered by the insult. Her quick response is to point out that even if Jesus tells her that his people must be taken care of first there is still enough to go around for those not considered part of that elite group. She is so concerned for her daughter that she challenges Jesus to open the gate wide so others can enter the kingdom of God – Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, those on the inside and those considered outsiders, even dogs like her and her daughter.

It is this interaction that Jesus had with this Gentile woman that teaches us to persevere with Christ no matter the initial response we receive. We may not like the answer we get but in the end we see clearly God's tenacious love for all people. Even if we cannot explain the response of Jesus we can certainly acknowledge that he did not walk away from her.

It is this interaction that Jesus had with this Gentile woman that teaches us about the blessing we receive from interacting with those outside our comfort zone who may stretch our way of thinking.

And from time to time we will meet people as bold (or as desperate) as this Gentile woman. They will come to us unannounced and plead for our mercy and we will have to be quick in our response.

In my attempt to bring Mark 7 into one cohesive lesson let me tell you about Arnold Abbott. In 1991 he founded an interfaith volunteer organization called *Love Thy Neighbor* that was developed as a loving tribute to his late wife, Maureen. As a couple they worked together (in their own words) to recycle and preserve the integrity of our most precious natural resource – human beings. In their county (near Fort Lauderdale) there were more than 10,000 homeless men, women and children who needed care and it became their mission to help them.

Since its inception the organization has grown to be a conglomerate of people of all religions, beliefs, color, and size working together with a common goal – caring for our less fortunate brothers and sisters. Arnold started out somewhat quietly but then he had to battle with some of the laws that had been established in his neighborhood ... laws that prohibited the public feeding of the homeless because their number had grown to the point where they were camping out in the downtown area and on the beaches. Laws were driven by the local businesses and residents who complained that the visible presence of the homeless in their neighborhoods was offensive.

So on several occasions this quiet and reserved man found himself in violation of those laws because he held picnics for the homeless on the beach. The city tried to ban him but did not succeed. Then they offered him an alternate site located miles away from the area where most of the homeless lived. The struggle ensued until Arnold (now at the tender age of 90) was almost arrested and it hit the national news. Since that time the laws were further examined and it was decided they were unconstitutional.

In Mark 7 Jesus opened the gate so we can be more flexible in our interpretation of the law. Yes, our civil laws need to be obeyed and when they do not line up with the will of God we have the means to correct them in good order. In Mark 7 Jesus also opened the gate to allow all people to enter. We can work together as a conglomerate of people for a common goal. And it might mean challenging some of our laws for the sake of those to whom we are to minister.

Elsewhere in the *Gospel of Mark* Jesus says that only those who give away their lives will find it. I think we just learned that lesson from this tenacious loving mother who just happened to be a Gentile. Amen