

Sermon: “*Persistent Faith*” September 8, 2024, Mark 7:24-37

Welcome to our communion service. This morning, we look to the Gospel of Mark, and we read about Jesus searching for a place of privacy as he and his disciples are walking up the coast from Galilee to the seaport city of Tyre and then on to Sidon, places inhabited by pagan Gentiles. Biblical Sidon was the home of Jezebel, who became queen of the Israelites, notorious for persecuting the worship of Yahweh and demanding that the Israelites worship the Canaanite God Baal, and yet Jesus went there to minister. It is the first time we see Him venture outside the borders of Israel to expand his ministry to the Gentiles. However, before he could take time to rest, he could not be hidden, for there would be a desperate woman Jesus knew about, and likewise, she had heard about him. In an act of faith, she thought maybe Jesus could heal her daughter. In a time before the internet and social media, I had to wonder how the word about Jesus spread so quickly. Nevertheless, in doing so, we also see Jesus with a Great Commission mentality, demonstrating that God’s kingdom is inclusive, transcending all ethnic, racial, or gender barriers as he goes about seeking and saving the lost. This inclusivity is a reminder that God’s love is for all, regardless of our background or circumstances. Even so, there remain guidelines and guardrails by which to live.

In those days, the gender of a woman was considered socially unacceptable to approach a Jewish rabbi, let alone to be bold enough to fall at his feet. In Matthew’s gospel, Matthew identifies this woman as a descendant of the Canaanite race, an inhabitant of the Phoenician part of Syria, and a Gentile from a pagan land outside God’s grace and blessing. The Jews saw themselves as God’s “children,” referring to all Gentiles as unworthy dogs unfit for the kingdom. Yet here is this Gentile woman who, with a profound understanding of who Jesus was, acknowledges her unworthiness and pleads for mercy. Her humility is a lesson for us all to be reflective, humble, and persistent, for it is those who are willing to take crumbs who share in the bread of salvation.

In his approach to this woman, Jesus tested her faith, saying to her, “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” In reply, she says, “Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children’s leftovers.” This was just the kind of faith that Jesus so greatly appreciated, and so Jesus wasted no time healing her daughter immediately, saying, “Go your way.” Why on earth would Jesus call this woman a dog? In English, it is easy to mistake this for an insult. Yet, Jesus is creating a metaphor apart from a racial slur to explain the priorities of his ministry and to teach his disciples a lesson they could understand. Jesus’ duty to his ministry was about the divine appointment God had given him. She had no reason to fear, for the “full meal of the Gospel bread” was for everyone, like little puppy dogs whose faith coupled with humility. God was at work in her heart, drawing her to salvation. For this woman and us, Jesus is a father to the orphan, a healer to the broken, peace to our madness, and a comfort in our sadness. This is our God, full of compassion and love.

Let’s pray. Heavenly Father, help us cultivate the simplicity of devotion to You. Help us behold Your beauty and dwell in Your house all the days of our lives. Help us to seek your heart as the goal of our lives, even in busy and stressful times. Teach us to enjoy life the way You desire. Amen.

The lesson we should take away from here today is that these stories of Jesus healing people all arrive in measures of persistent faith by others in moments of another's mediation. Both stories in today's message are similar, beginning in private as odd or weird situations, with the person healed either present or at other times from a distance. In the first story, we read about the woman who goes home to find her child with an unclean spirit healed. The portrait is of a socially unaccepted woman who was persistent in begging Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. In the Gospel of Matthew 15, we read the same story: She came in boldness, falling at his feet using Jesus' Old Testament covenant name. "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession." A model of persistent faith. She was not an unclean, dirty scavenger type of dog, as the Jews would describe. No, this woman was capable of receiving the same salvation because she believed. Jesus says to her, "O Woman, great is your faith! Your request is granted."

The second story occurs in the region of the Decapolis. There were ten cities in the area of the Decapolis, and by the time Jesus made his journey, he would have traveled 120 miles. Here, just like the story of the Syrophenician woman, the persistence of a deaf mute's friends pleads for Jesus to come to the aid of a deaf man who could not speak for himself. Jesus takes him away from the crowd, puts his fingers in his ears, and then spits, touching the man's tongue as he looks up to heaven and sighs. What happens? The man's ears are opened, and he begins to speak plainly. Why did Jesus look upward and sigh? First, Jesus knows that only a divine power can heal. Second, we see a Savior who sympathizes with our sorrows. It is called "Divine accomplishment, not human achievement."

Did you know that Jesus Christ is the greatest missionary who ever lived? He came from the most significant distance, from heaven to earth, making the greatest sacrifice for our salvation. He gave his life in the place of sinners so that we might be reconciled to God. Indeed, all who come to Him will find salvation from the One who "could not be hidden, the One who does "all things well." Mark packages two healing miracles in pagan, Gentile territory. One is the healing of a demon-possessed little girl, and the other is a deaf man with a speech impediment. Both demonstrate that God's kingdom has come and Jesus is the Savior for all people of all nations. This inclusivity of Jesus' ministry means that no one is excluded, and all are accepted and valued.

What a magnificent picture of salvation we have: We are all like dogs as sinners under the table with no rights as family members, looking for crumbs, but in his mercy and grace, our Savior, who does all things well, raises us out from under the table. Jesus hears our cries for help even in moments when we are incapable of communicating for ourselves.

In Jesus' three-and-a-half-year ministry, there were some people that he wanted to get a hold of along the way. Special appointments he had already planned to meet up with. Why do you think He left Israel, and why didn't he stay around Galilee or Jerusalem? The answer: to demonstrate John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. That everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." Brothers and sisters, He did not come specifically for the Jewish people. He came for all people. He came for us.

Before I get closer to the end, allow me to explain the context and cultural language within the first passage. First, the context is the dinner table, the supper table when we sit around with our family—the ones we love, our children, our wife, and our relatives—in a private dinner.

The second is the Greek language that was used at that time. There were two different words for a dog. One word used is Kuon, meaning a despised dog that runs the streets and goes about eating garbage, running all about attacking people—a term used by the Jews toward Gentiles as those unfit for the kingdom. The second term, kunarion, means an owned pet around the dinner table looking for scraps. Those of you who have ever owned a family dog know what I mean.

Two thousand years ago, the writings of the Old Testament excluded certain races because they were marked for extinction by the way they treated Israel. Unfit for the kingdom. But when Jesus said, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs,” Jesus used this statement to draw out the kind of faith displayed in this passage. In essence, this woman asks: Jesus, would you go beyond the borders and give me some extra blessing? Could you throw me some scraps? What is it that can we learn? She knew who Jesus was as the Messiah, who the children of Israel were, and her place in the ancient covenant, and she also knew the mercy of God. That God so loved the world who would be willing to extend his mercy to other people. It was an informed faith, a humble faith, and **a persistent faith.**

Soon, we will join together in the Lord’s Supper, but as I come to a close, when Jesus said, “I do all things well,” it should remind us of the Father’s creation in the book of Genesis. Each time God made something, he would remark, saying, “It is good.” Like the Son in redemption and the Father in creation, he does all things well. Here’s a thought I will leave with you. Both people in these stories were outsiders that Jesus was looking for. He sought them to bring into his family. He had an appointment with them. Jesus does not always travel in a straight path. Sometimes, he takes the roundabout way. All of us are outsiders without any right to go to heaven. None of us have any standing before God, but just like at the end of the creation narrative, God stood back and blessed the man and the woman, seeing all that he had made was very good. Jesus comes looking for us to bless us into the blood of the new covenant.

The truth is that God is looking for you. We are the ones who are lost and need to be found. He wants to bring peace and purpose to our lives. He is persistent. Trying to drink from any other well is sort of like eating Chinese food because if you are like me, in an hour, you will still be hungry. The good news is that today, your search can be over, and you leave here today filled. You can go from here as a different person than the person who walked in. Your sins can be forgiven. Jesus healed many people, but his purpose was to save many people. **Let us take a moment to bow our heads as the elders prepare to pass out the elements. As we quiet our hearts in this place, we are about to take bread and juice that are reminiscent of the Lord’s Supper, the Passover meal that he shared with his disciples, the very meal that our Lord said to do this often and do it in remembrance of him. We consider it a sacred and holy time, a holy memory. By taking these elements, we are making the statement that we are a saved people and that no amount of good work, sincerity, or religious rules is enough to get us into heaven. It is by your work, Lord, and it is by your completed work on the cross, and through your blood, it is to your cross we cling. With our hearts bowed, our eyes closed, if you are willing to receive Jesus Christ as your payment for your sin, your savior, your Lord, if you are willing to accept him, Father, I thank you for each life here now. You know them and the things they have been dealing with. The obstacles they face and the difficulties they are now enduring. You know their hopes and dreams. You know their failures and their sin, and you are willing to forgive and give them new life. In Jesus’ name, I pray, Amen.**