



SUNDAY SERMON

Open Heart

My dear friend Curt is a recovering alcoholic. As a sponsor in AA helping others, his longtime practice when he goes to a meeting is to look around and ask himself, "who is the most important person in the room today?" In AA meetings, the most important is the one who had a drink most recently and is at risk of doing so again.

Curt has begun a similar practice at his church – coming in on a Sunday morning, looking at each other person and wondering, "who is the most important person in God's world?" Said Curt, it's usually not me. "In God's eyes, who among us is going through some particularly challenging time, awaiting, seeking God's grace, or reflecting God's light?" It's a practice to open our hearts in compassion for one another. Take a look around you. Don't judge or pity anyone. Be open in your heart. Practice life with Christ.

In today's Gospel, Jesus didn't go to AA or church or the temple. He went to get away from the crowds – way up north to the city of Tyre, a Phoenician city, a Greek city, where he hoped to just go unnoticed. Maybe he wanted a little peace and quiet, a chance to be with God and catch his breath.

It didn't work. He was confronted by a woman who wanted healing for her daughter. It's a pretty ugly exchange. Even though Jesus is the one who moments before was challenging the Pharisees to quit fussing over their social taboos, here he pretty much calls this Greek pagan woman a dog. It's a familiar cultural slur; maybe Jesus picked it up at home, or on the playground as a kid.

We're okay with Jesus being fully human when he weeps or grieves, when he's frustrated and angry. How about when Jesus just gets worn out? This incident comes in the midst of Jesus doing a lot of healing and a lot of feeding. Maybe it's easier to feed 5,000 strangers on the hillside than it is to share bread with this particular person at this particular moment in time. I know it's a lot easier for me to espouse love of the stranger in a general sense, than it is for me to deal with the stranger who presents himself wanting to engage me on the street. "Excuse me sir, can you help?"

That's the hard edge of injustice and need: it knows no bounds. It presents itself at the most inopportune times. The cry of those impoverished is relentless. The cry of those demeaned by racial bigotry, of those to whom justice is being denied this very hour... those cries do not cease.

These cries are not proud; they do not wait for a proper time. This foreign, unclean woman, desperate for her little daughter, takes Jesus' slur about the dogs, takes it in stride and turns it right back on him: "call me whatever you must, sir, but you know better than this; even the dogs need to be fed. Grace is not finite, the feast is not limited. God's love is abundant, offered to all. Isn't that right, Jesus!?"

Continued

DATE

Sixteenth Sunday after
Pentecost
Sun., September 9, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

VERSE

Mark 7:24-37

The text does not say so, but you know he smiled: a smile of resignation... and confession: she's right, she called me out; my lens was too narrow; there is no limit to God's grace; this woman has spunk; she has faith; her daughter's demon is gone; she is healed.

If, like me, you are seeking to follow in the path of Christ, even just a little bit... we're not trying to be saints or anything... then you too are living with this open call upon your heart: love your neighbor. You've accepted and embraced this call.

Did the Syro-Phoenician woman change Jesus? Maybe. Certainly she held him accountable to his own teachings and his own heart. I think that's why this story is here for us. To remind or teach us: we cannot be Christians at some safe remove. The call upon us... to respond... is not on your schedule or mine, and it may well force us to change our thinking, or change our hearts.

I have long believed that for those with choice and mobility, it is essential to put ourselves in the company of those without such privilege. Jesus met the woman when he left his own neighborhood and crossed the border. What border can we cross? On the way, our best self may not be on display. In truth, our ugly sides – those born of fear, bigotry, self-importance, or pride – need to be exposed if we're really going to address them.

Do we need to hear this hard word today? Maybe some do. That same night, after the woman left, before he went to sleep, Jesus was saying his prayers. He thought to himself, "this is harder than I thought; I did not see that coming." Then he prayed, "thank you God, for bringing her to me, opening me to your love – and to the fullness of love for all."

Dear ones, the love we share is love that comes from God. We are Christ's hands, and Christ's heart, just as that other is Christ for us.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta had a dream that before they die all people will know that they are loved. A big dream. To realize this dream, said she, "Just begin, one, one, one. Begin at home by saying something good to your child, to your husband, or to your wife. Begin by helping someone in need in your community, at work, or at school. Begin by making whatever you do something beautiful for God." MT.7

When the needs of the world feel overwhelming, just begin, one, one, one. When I reflect on the life of this congregation, I am aware that it offers an extraordinary witness as we seek to follow in the way of Christ. Individually, its mostly simple stuff. Ushering and welcoming a stranger on Sunday. Serving lunch one day a week for Water Ministry. Putting your trash in the correct zero waste container. Going to a meeting. Polishing a candle stick. Caring for a neighbor. Simple, really. But the power of love originates from small groups of people that begin to take responsibility for one another and the world around them.

In *My Bright Abyss* (p.84), poet, Christian Wiman, writes: "One day when I had gone to a little chapel near my office at lunchtime and was once more praying while wondering how and why and to whom I prayed, a man came in and eased into the pew directly across the aisle from me. As we were the only two people there, his choice of where to sit seemed odd, and irritating. Within a couple of minutes, all thought of God was gone into the man's constant movements and his elaborate sighs, and when I finally rose in exasperation, he stood immediately to face me. He had the sandblasted look of long poverty, the skeletal clarity of long addiction, and that vaguely aggressive abasement that truly tests the nature of one's charity. Very cunning, I noted, failing the test even as I opened my wallet: to stake out this little chapel, to prey upon the praying! For days then it nagged at me – not him, but it, the situation – which, I finally realized, was precisely the problem: how easily a fatal complacency seeps into even those acts we undertake as disciplines, and how comfortable we become with our own intellectual and spiritual discomfort. Wondering how and why and to whom I prayed? I felt almost as if God had been telling me, as if Christ were telling me (in church no less): get off your mystified ass and do something."

Who is the most important person – here or beyond, in the eyes and heart of God? Cross the border. Go to them. Receive what they give. Practice life with Christ. Amen.