

**September 8, 2024**  
**“Community, for Real”**  
**James 2:8-13 / Mark 7:24-37**  
**Pastor Tim**

In preparing the sermon this week, for this Community Sunday, I just want to acknowledge that I did not set out to preach ABOUT community. In the way that I would and do—on Easter Sunday, say—necessarily preach about the Resurrection.

Sometimes the liturgical calendar tells you where to go. Mostly, though, the Spirit moves where it will. So as it turns out, as you can see from the sermon title, this IS, in fact, a sermon about community.

The reading from James gets us started with some basics of community, of community-building: “You all will do well if you actually fulfill the majestic law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.”

Love your neighbor as yourself. Show no favoritism. Got it.

The lesson from the gospel of Mark, with its back-to-back healing narratives, takes us deeper, beginning with Jesus’ all-at-once FASCINATING, INTRIGUING, TROUBLING, DISTURBING, POWERFUL encounter with the woman—and we note, as is so often the case, a nameless woman—identified as “Syrophenician,” whose daughter had an unclean spirit.

The account is also found in Matthew, where the woman is identified as “Canaanite.” That may be a more familiar name to many of you than “Syrophenician,” but all you really need to understand here in either case is that she was a Gentile. She was not Jewish, like Jesus and his disciples.

In fact, the region where Jesus is traveling is identified in Mark’s account as Tyre (TIRE) – a region located northwest of Galilee, Jesus’s home turf. A region despised by Jews, going back centuries when the people of Tyre were considered enemies of Israel, and were victims of God’s wrath according to several accounts from Hebrew scripture. You may also recall that Canaan was the land the Israelites violently occupied and conquered

after 40 years of wilderness wandering in the desert. Identified by God as their “promised land.”

The point here is that Jesus is venturing into foreign territory. And to be clear, he is intentionally venturing – across social and cultural boundaries, not just geographical, physical, as he is want to do.

A working definition of community, according to Wikipedia, is this: “a social unit (a group of living things) with a shared socially-significant characteristic, such as place, set of norms, culture, religion, values, customs, or identity.”

That’s not wrong, of course, but it’s boring. It’s just the facts. It’s the structure of community without the spirit. The soul.

And to get at the spirit and soul of community, Jesus—in this case and in so many others—insists that community-building ultimately requires boundary-crossing. It requires us to engage with people who are different than we are.

In Mark, unlike in Matthew’s account, Jesus is apparently trying to get some peace and quiet, entering a house where he “did not want anyone to know he was . . .” Ever have days like that?

The woman finds him, though, finds her way into the house. Jesus’ reputation has preceded him, so she knows who he is. She’s at least heard what he’s capable of, and so she comes and bows down at his feet. And she begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter.

In Mark, she simply begs. That’s all it says. In Matthew, she SHOUTS: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

She means to be heard! In Mark, if you will, she gently knocks at the door. In Matthew, she bangs the door down!

And here we get to the fascinating, intriguing ... troubling, disturbing part of their exchange.

In Matthew's account, Jesus ignores the woman when she begs for his help. At least at first. His disciples try to get him to send her away because she keeps shouting, and then Jesus responds, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

And when she persists, kneeling down before him—a foreigner, remember—as a sign of respect, pleading that he help her and her daughter anyway, he says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

In Mark, he says more or less the same thing. He doesn't ignore her, but he may as well have: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

The dogs. Yes, you are hearing that right. Dogs.

This is Jesus talking. Jesus, compassionate Jesus, insults this foreign woman with an ethnic slur. The literal translation is more like "small dogs" – like little puppies or house pets – but it is a decidedly and disturbingly derogatory term all the same. This is JESUS talking!

Now if you're at all like me, you grew up with "perfect Jesus." The Jesus who had to be perfect because the traditional theology constructed around his somehow being both fully human and fully divine depended on it. The Jesus who, according to traditional Pauline theology, was without sin but who became sin "so that we might become the righteousness of God." The Jesus who never messed up, never came up short, never said or did the wrong thing, never had to apologize or admit he was wrong.

You might make the argument, as many have and still do, that Jesus must've had a good reason. He must've had some reason to treat this hurting, vulnerable woman as badly as he does. To use the offensive language that he does. He couldn't have meant it THAT way.

Maybe he was testing the woman. Using language and reasoning that his contemporaries, his fellow Jews, would likely have used because that's how they would've felt – but behind it, secretly testing the woman's persistence and faith as a lesson to his current and would-be followers. Maybe?

But to read the story that way doesn't do justice to its full power. So I invite you to hear the story where Jesus is as human as he is divine. Where he is more painfully – and frankly, more relatably – human.

We continue, then, following Jesus's harsh words, to the POWERFUL part. The profound power, first, of her response.

Test or not, she would not and could not have felt anything other than insulted by Jesus. Likely used to it but insulted just the same. And most likely surrounded by men, by foreigners. Picture the scene, the intensity of the moment. This outsider, she who in this context is profoundly OTHER and has just been profoundly OTHERED by none other than Jesus, pushes back. She stands her ground and she fights back!

She points Jesus's racial slur back at him and turns his table metaphor on its head. In our reading from Mark, she says, "Sir, even the dogs," EVEN the DOGS, "UNDER the table eat the children's crumbs." We can't miss THIS power in the story, her courageous persistence—on behalf of her daughter's well-being—to speak truth to the power in the room.

We're used to Jesus speaking truth to the politically and economically and religiously powerful, but here Jesus represents the power to whom truth must be spoken.

This seemingly powerless, nameless woman boldly insists that SHE and her DAUGHTER are just as deserving of healing as anyone else.

Debie Thomas writes that it's "As if to say, 'Lord, where's my Good News? Where's my place at the table? When will the goodness be good enough for me and for my daughter? If you are who you say you are, how can you be content while anyone goes hungry in the vicinity of your table? The good news is here somewhere, latent and waiting. I know it's here; you already have it. Now let it come to fruition. Look harder. Push further. See better. Believe that there's enough good news to go around. Expand the circle. Dissolve the boundaries. Widen the table. Preach your Good News to me.'"

Hear THAT power in THIS woman! Feel that power in this nameless woman! At this point the story is about her, not Jesus.

As Steve Garnaas-Holmes puts it:

*Jesus may have meant it as a test, or a sly challenge,  
or an ironic naming of existing biases;  
or maybe he thoughtlessly repeated a racial slur  
when he said dogs don't get the children's food.  
It doesn't matter to her. She has a witty rejoinder,  
an irrefutable argument, a bit of verbal jujitsu.  
She's not arguing with reality,  
or looking for a loophole in the laws of God.  
She's taking apart *The Way We See Things*,  
for she knows there are cracks in it.  
She's arguing with *Conventional Wisdom*,  
with *What Everybody Knows*—  
for behind that is the actual truth,  
the reality of God's grace,  
God's kindness toward everyone.  
Everyone.  
She knows it's there, hidden by our prejudices.  
Whenever anyone tries to put a limit on grace, it's fakery.  
Poke right through it.  
Even if it takes Jesus by surprise, he'll love it.*

Which brings us back to Jesus. Now hear and feel the power of an all-too-human Jesus—necessarily product of his social context, informed and shaped as all of us are by conscious and unconscious biases and prejudices—taken by surprise. But open to having HIS mind and HIS heart opened back to love.

“For saying that,” Jesus says, “you may go – the demon has left your daughter.” In Matthew, his response lifts her up as an example, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Barbara Brown Taylor describes the moment this way: “You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do.”

How much more powerful to imagine One, to follow One, who—in his imperfect humanity, like the rest of us—is able to acknowledge his own growing edges, his own blind spots. A teacher willing and able to be the student, to understand that learning is a mutual and ongoing process, requiring engagement across difference and across boundaries of all kinds. Boundaries are learned, and so boundaries can be unlearned.

As Debie Thomas says, “The ‘Good News’ is not that we serve a shiny, inaccessible deity who floats five feet above the ground. It is that Jesus shows us—in real time, in the flesh—what it means to grow as a child of God. He embodies what it looks like to stretch into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God’s love.”

And she goes on, reflecting on what it means to move beyond any notion of a “perfect Jesus”: “Here’s the best part of letting Perfect Jesus go, and letting Real Jesus win our hearts instead: Real Jesus accepts the instruction of the woman who challenges him. He allows her—the ethnic, religious, and gendered Other—to school him in his own gospel. To deconstruct his bias and entitlement. To break the barrier of his prejudice. To teach him compassion. The Jesus who never loses a verbal contest with anyone else in Scripture sits back in amazement and concedes the argument to an audacious, female foreigner.”

Hear all of THAT power in understanding what community looks like! A woman vulnerable enough to demand she be heard when all around are telling her to be silent, speaking her truth. Insisting there be no favorites. Reminding Jesus, of all people, the definition of neighbor.

And a fully human, Jesus, vulnerable himself. Humbled. Acknowledging the error of his ways. Learning still, always—EVEN Jesus, of all people—to love more deeply, more widely, more consistently.

That, friends, is a picture of authentic community. Community, FOR REAL. Community that does not always come easily, but that always, always, ALWAYS, insists on love. Inclusion. Belonging. All means all.

You may be familiar with the late American psychiatrist and author, M. Scott Peck – author, among other books, of “The Road Less Traveled” and “The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace.”

This is his definition of community, moving of us from the stale structure of it to the enlivening spirit and soul of it; community that doesn't just happen organically but has to be built, with intention and with love. He writes: community is “a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to ‘rejoice together, mourn together,’ and to ‘delight in each other, make others' conditions our own.’”

He names his own basics for authentic community:

- Community must be inclusive
- Community must be realistic and have consensus
- Community must have contemplation and self-awareness
- Community must be a safe place
- Community must show vulnerability and peacemaking
- Community must be able to express differences gracefully
- Community must be a place where all are leaders
- Community must have an atmosphere of love

The kind of love Jesus embodies, and I mean EMBODIES, in the healing story that follows his encounter with the Syrophenician woman.

A deaf man—and it should be noted, again, a Gentile—with a speech impediment is BROUGHT to Jesus, so that he might lay hands on him. The deaf man does not come on his own.

Jesus takes the man aside in private, away from the crowd. Why, we don't know – any more than we know why he tells everyone after he heals the man not to tell anyone.

In private, Jesus doesn't offer a prayer of healing. He EMBODIES it – literally putting his fingers in the man's ears, spitting and touching the man's tongue. A fleshy—and frankly, gross—picture of what it means in authentic relationship, in community, to mourn together, to make others' conditions our own. Jesus SEES this man, meets him where he is, in a way that he did not, at first, see the Syrophenician woman.

Consider the vulnerability of both Jesus and the deaf man in this incredibly intimate exchange.

Looking up to heaven, presumably calling on all the power he can muster, the word Jesus uses is “Ephphatha.” A transliteration of the Aramaic, the language of Jesus and the primary spoken language of most Jews in first-century Palestine.

The word meaning, “be opened,” as Mark's gospel tells us.

Be opened, and just like that, the man's ears are, so that HE can hear. And his tongue is released so that HE can speak clearly. Just like that.

Ephphatha. Be opened. Open up.

Isn't that the call of beloved community, the kin-dom of God? To risk vulnerability in order to be opened ourselves, AND to risk vulnerability to help each other open up, as needed – to love. Again and again and again and again. And so to healing in one form or another, and to the possibility and promise of new life.

With a vision for building community, COURAGEOUS enough to speak our truth—even and perhaps especially to power—with love and grace for each other. And HUMBLE enough to look and listen for the truth—when we can't see or hear it at first, even when it hurts—with love and grace for ourselves.

“Be opened,” the Gentile woman says to the Jewish Jesus. “Be opened,” the Jewish Jesus says to the Gentile deaf man.



Be opened to the experience of authentic, love-filled community. The good news for all of us, friends, is that God's welcome, God's embrace, God's beloved community, is wider than we who are fully human—as Jesus was—are sometimes willing or able to acknowledge. Much less practice.

So may we, friends, be vulnerable enough to be opened. May we open OUR eyes, our ears, our minds, our hearts, our lives to love above all else. To an ever-wider circle, a more inclusive table and a more authentic experience of community.

May we open ourselves up to learning and wisdom from unexpected places and people, across boundary and difference. And may we open up to the possibility of growth and change, of healing and new life, where we may not even believe it's possible.

Within the beloved community we build together, FOR REAL, it is.

May it be so.