

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
Psalm 125
James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

All of us have been in a school situation at one point or another in our lives and most of our memories usually center around what we experienced in high school. It's an interesting time in life as children morph into adolescents on their way to adulthood. That high school atmosphere is a testing ground and a proving ground as students try to figure out where they fit among their peers. There's a lot of jockeying for position and cliques of all kinds. It can be a very stressful time and a very painful time...and that's without all the academic expectations. There are always several 'In Crowds'...those cliques in schools that seem to get the most attention and wield the most power and influence. Everyone seems to want the security and the prestige of being in the 'In Crowd.' In some way, a position in the 'In Crowd' gives young people a reassuring sense of having earned their peers' approval. Being in the 'In Crowd' makes them feel like they are OK, which is something all of us want throughout our lives.

The Gospel lesson from Mark that we just heard shares with us two situations in which Jesus is dealing with people who are definitely not part of the 'In Crowd.' After his confrontation with the Pharisees about what defines defilement, he takes a little trip. Jesus goes on retreat. He seems to want to get away from it all, so he goes to Tyre which is about a three day walk from where he has been ministering around the Sea of Galilee. It's a Gentile city on the coast of the Mediterranean. He enters a house there, but the scripture doesn't tell us whose house it was or why he decided to go there. It only says that he didn't want anyone to know he was there.

Jesus isn't quite so lucky. He is discovered by a Gentile woman that Mark identifies as Syrophenician. It's interesting that Mark includes this little detail because it gives us a clue about Jesus' reaction to her. The Syrophenicians are a group in that region whose policies and lifestyle are a source of suffering and oppression of the mostly poor, rural Jewish inhabitants. The Syrophenicians aren't very kind to their Jewish neighbors. The Jewish neighbors are not part of the 'In crowd' in that neck of the woods. Perhaps that tells us why Jesus reacts to this unnamed woman the way he does.

This woman is bold if nothing else. She's breaking all kinds of barriers by even speaking to Jesus. She's a woman alone...out in public...speaking to a man she does not know. But she's desperate. And how does she know that he is Jesus? She seems to know exactly who she's

talking to. Has his reputation already spread that far? The Syrophoenician woman is definitely part of the 'In Crowd' in the City of Tyre, but definitely on the outside of Jesus' community. That doesn't seem to matter to her. Her daughter is possessed by a demon and she believes that Jesus can save the little girl.

We've seen this kind of scenario before...Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging; the man lowered from a rooftop by his friends who seek healing for him from Jesus; the ten lepers with only one returning; and many more. We know how Jesus responds to these desperate pleas for healing. He is gracious. He is compassionate. More often than not, he tells the now-healed person, "Go in peace. Your faith has made you well."

That's not at all what happens this time. And we are startled. Jesus is not gracious with the Syrophoenician woman. He's blunt and he insults her. He tells her "Let the children be fed first (meaning the Jews), for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Did Jesus just imply that this woman is a dog? That's not like the Jesus we know. The Jesus we know is gracious and accepting. The Jesus we know is all-inclusive...healing whoever needs healing. Now he is drawing some boundaries. Now he is declaring the Israelites...the Jews...to be the 'In Crowd' and she is clearly on the outside.

There are any number of explanations for why Jesus reacted as he did. One explanation is that he is exhausted and annoyed that he's been found and imposed upon again when he is desperately trying to get some solitude. Perhaps. Or there's the explanation that says he was goading her a bit...testing her...to find out how strong her faith was. Maybe. And there's this explanation: maybe he was still trying to figure out the scope of his ministry and from his perspective...so early in his ministry...it seemed to him that his ministry was for Israel alone, but there are too many contradictory stories to give this explanation much merit. And then there's the interpretation that the translation for the word 'dogs' can also be translated as 'puppies' which is not nearly as offensive. The only problem with that theory is that Jesus most likely spoke Aramaic and there is no Aramaic word for 'puppy.' So Jesus said what he said.

Remember, we are hearing lessons from the gospel of Mark. The gospel of Mark emphasizes Jesus' humanity. Perhaps we are seeing the very human side of Jesus...just for a moment. Perhaps he is exhausted. And perhaps he is feeling like the scope of his ministry is for Israel alone. He flatly turned her down. He even gave her the rationale and finished his comments off with a slur. And yet, she persisted.

In one sense, she accepted what he said but came back with a logical retort: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” And Jesus thought about that. And then Jesus changed his mind!

Jesus’ mission on earth was to redeem us...to save us from being cut off from God by our own wickedness. But it was also about letting us see the nature of God and inviting us to glimpse the kingdom of heaven. There is no “In Crowd” in the kingdom of heaven. All of God’s children are valued there. Each of them is important. All of them have a place at the table. And persistence pays. Continuing to pray for our needs and then storming heaven when we are in distress has its own rewards. Jesus changed his mind because the words of this woman rang true to him. He allowed her plea and her logic to redirect his thoughts. Is he showing us that God’s mind can be swayed by our prayers? Perhaps. It wasn’t just that this woman’s daughter was transformed in this encounter, but the woman herself was transformed and so was Jesus.

How hard is it for us to change our minds? How embarrassing does it feel to realize...suddenly...that maybe we’ve been looking at things all wrong. That’s a very uncomfortable admission. Nobody wants to admit that they’re wrong. But if we are growing in thought and spirit and heart then this will happen to us on a regular basis. It is what happens to us when we have an encounter with someone else whose words ring true. And Jesus’ words ring true...over and over again. It happens to us when our souls are stirred by the Holy Spirit. It happens to us when God moves in our lives in unexpected and powerful ways. Changing our minds is the essential in growing.

And when we change our minds, we see the world around us a bit differently. We experience others a little differently. We are less likely to search for a place that makes us feel like we are part of the ‘In Crowd’ and we place more trust in God and in divine wisdom. We are willing to look at things in new ways...have relationships that we had never dreamed of before...feel more comfortable inside our own skin. And we look for ways to move out into the larger world with God’s message of love and grace and forgiveness.

When we allow our minds to change, our hearts follow and we begin to reach out to others as never before. How do we as the Body of Christ that is St. Paul’s want to reach out to others? Do we feel to strangers a bit like the ‘In Crowd’ or do we feel like a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven where everyone is included, accepted and belongs? Will we let our imaginations take us beyond these walls with the Good News of Jesus? Will we live into our mission in our actions in concrete ways?

In many ways this is the time of year for both reflection and planning? It is the beginning of a new school year when routines change and we see our children growing beyond us. As the Book of James told us in our New Testament lesson this morning..."What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but do not have works?" The works are the concrete actions that reflect our faith. The works are the things we do to find the marginalized...those not in the "In Crowd" ... just as Jesus did and to fill their needs and bring them in.

Be persistent in your prayers and be open to new possibilities. Let your imaginations loose as you pray about how St. Paul's can put its profound and deeply committed faith into action.

No matter your reservations about that...just remember...with God all things are possible.

AMEN.