

Sermon Proper 18 2018

September 9, 2018

Mark 7:24-37

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

I know I have spoken in the past about my conversion from Roman Catholicism to Lutheranism as one that occurred by sort of swinging on the pendulum of Christianity through general American Evangelicalism. Something I often reflect on in relation to that time is my understanding of faith. To the credit of my Christian brothers and sisters who guided in me in the Word at that time, there was the clear testimony that it was salvation by grace through faith that encompassed the message of Christ and the Scriptures. However, in reaction to the hierarchical understanding of the clergy in Roman Catholicism—what could be called clericalism, or even sacerdotalism, if you want the fancy word—in reaction to that, when I came to understand that a Christian is called to read and to know the Scriptures and to know the Lord on an individual level, what Luther called the Priesthood of the Baptized, unfortunately I also became somewhat arrogant.

I mentioned something to the credit of my brothers and sisters at that time, but to their discredit, there were some who were anti-clerical to the point that they criticized seminaries as unnecessary and impediments to the work of the Spirit. There were others who warned me to be careful about attending seminary because they knew many had lost their faith there—something that I think was probably a reaction to the many seminaries that sadly don't treat the Word of God with the honor it deserves. But with all of that in mind as I would look at faith, my faith as a Christian, it made me arrogant.

What I mean is that there was sort of this implicit understanding that I should look at the examples of faithfulness in Scripture and sort of align myself with them. In particular, take the example of Hebrews Chapter 11. Many of you might know that this chapter is sometimes called the "Hall of Faith." This where the writer to the Hebrews lists all of these beautiful examples from the Old Testament to encourage his audience to faithfulness like theirs—you could say that just as their faith showed forth in their works, ours should as well, just like James tells us. But what I thought this meant was that I should see myself before God as being like them; that I should see myself as a Moses or an Abraham or one of the 12 disciples rather than as Joseph of Arimathea or

even as one of the grumbling Israelites. I should see myself as an authority merely because I knew the Word and was Christian. I should maybe even expect to hear God as they did. I thought that my calling as a Christian entitled me to see myself as equivalent to any clergy man, not merely in holiness, but in authority.

You see I missed something in that passage. I went around with zeal that was good, but I spoke without understanding. In a way that may not have been clear to those around me, in my head all I needed was my Bible and me. I didn't need a pastor, I didn't need the church, I didn't need anything. I probably thought I could just be an island. But what I missed was what the writer to the Hebrews says about Noah. As the writer talks about Noah, he says that because of Noah's "reverent fear" he built an ark. Now this word, "reverent fear" and its related forms are only used two other times in the New Testament, both in the letter to the Hebrews. The first time the author to the Hebrews uses the word to describe how Jesus was heard by God because of His reverence, His "reverent fear." Then he uses it for Noah, and finally, to call to the Church to worship in that reverence, that "reverent fear." That's what I didn't understand. There isn't this demanding entitled position before God and man, there is not arrogance, not pride, this faith is found in reverent fear.

As we hear lessons today, I think that's this Syrophenician Woman. That epitomizes her doesn't it? What better word to describe her faith than that reverent fear? She comes to Jesus in that reverent fear, doesn't she? Look at the circumstances. Here her daughter has a demon, surely she's at her wits' end, and she comes to the Jewish Messiah, the Chosen One, the One who's been healing and bringing the Kingdom of God to earth, and what does He say? She comes and asks Him, and does He say, "Of course, it would be my pleasure? What an honor for me to heal your daughter."? No. What does He say? **"Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."**

Now what our Lord is referencing there is that the Messiah was promised to the Jews; He was promised to the Jews as their Savior, and through the Jews as the People of God. He was Jewish. Now of course, we know that this is also for the Gentiles ultimately, but there is a "prerogative"—as I read it to be called this week—there's a prerogative for Him to give first right of refusal of sorts to the Jews. But how does the woman respond? I mean look at what He's really saying. He's calling her a dog, isn't He? Which first of all isn't something we expect of our nice friendly Jesus; not something we would encourage in our day when the reputation of the Church is in such decline. But that's what He says to her. And how does she respond? Does she take

offense? Does she look at Him and say, “How dare He call me a dog?” No. She hears Him and agrees. **“Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”** What a beautiful confession. What a demonstration of this reverent fear: “Lord I am a dog, but I know that in Your abundance even the dogs get crumbs.”

That is faith isn’t it? As I read a commentator on this say, this woman *“shows that in obedience to the will of God she recognises the prerogative of Israel. She simply appeals to the readiness of Jesus to help, which knows no frontiers.”* In the midst of this trial, in the midst of apparent rejection by Jesus, this woman clings to the promise that the Messiah is the One whose desire to help “knows no frontiers,” has no boundaries. That is reverent fear: fear that knows its place before God as unworthy and reverence that bows before Him humbly. Think about this for yourself. Are you willing to call yourself a dog before God and beg for crumbs, or do you demand from Him? But in this reverent fear is faith.

But faith in what? Faith in those promises that we heard in Isaiah: **“Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.”** Faith that trusts in the fulfillment of that promise like we saw in the later part of that lesson: the deaf man whose ears are opened by the fingers of the Lord, and whose tongue is unstopped by His hand. Ultimately, the faith that this Messiah is the One who does come bringing that Kingdom where God overcomes the tyranny and darkness of sin, and through His life gives us life.

That’s the faith to which we are called as well: the faith of reverent fear. We too are called to hear Jesus’ Word to trust it. To trust it even when it feels as though He is pushing us away and calling us dogs. We are to trust that Word even in the cases where all of the things of this world: death, sickness, pain, suffering, and worst of all our own sin; to trust even over and against these things.

I know that I have used this example before, but I always love that picture that Peter gives in the first chapter of his second letter. In that chapter he begins by talking about how he and the other disciples did not follow “cleverly devised myths” when they went up on the mountain and heard the voice borne from heaven saying, “this is my beloved Son listen to Him.” And of course as he says that, what’s he describing? He’s describing the transfiguration, when Jesus shone with the glory of the divinity. And then he says that we have the prophetic word made more sure—we have the Scripture that

is even more certain. Think about that. Peter saw Jesus shine with the glory of God right before his very eyes, and yet he tells us that the scriptures are more certain than that, the Scriptures which tell you that Jesus has loved you, the Scriptures that tell you that you are sinner, an enemy of God even, in that sin, and yet God has loved you and reconciled Himself to you in that love. That is more sure than Peter on the mountain with Jesus.

As I say this, something I have been reading a fair amount about lately is the report that came out of Pennsylvania regarding sex abuse cases and cover-ups by the Roman Catholic Church. I don't know if you've read any of that. I actually was given an article that made a good point about this. It said that while this could easily give a crisis of faith, and I think there's an aspect where we can be sympathetic to that. After all, here are people who are supposed to be representing Jesus, and they're committing horrible atrocities. That can create a crisis of faith. But the article made the point that this isn't Jesus Himself doing it, so we should cling to Him.

In other words, it's in the midst of that, that we cling to the word of Jesus' promise. In fact, tying this to the healing of the man, we too cling to the promise that just as Jesus stuck His fingers in the man's ears and unloosed His tongue with His own hands, He still comes to us. He still tangibly and concretely, still incarnates Himself among us, bringing His healing. Where? In the waters of baptism; in His body and blood in His Supper. There He is opening our ears to hear of His goodness, loosing our tongues to confess Him to the world. There He is, because the word says so and promises it.

Christians, have reverent fear, have real faith before that word. Hear that word, know that it is true. Know that you are a dog in relation to the goodness of our Lord. But know that He gives His crumbs even for you. That's what faith does. In reverent fear it heeds those promises, not boastfully, not arrogantly and demandingly. No it comes as a beggar. It comes with hands open, and it receives humbly from God, because that's all that we can do. Because, just like that Syrophenician Woman, we are beggars. This is true. But our Lord Jesus loves to give to those in need. Amen.