

September 9, 2018 – Rally Day, Sunday School Kick-off, Reception of New Members  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Mark 7: 24-30

### **Open to Interpretation**

“Who cares for God’s creation?” That’s the Sunday school theme for this program year, which begins today. “Who cares for God’s creation?” The question is open to interpretation, as the theme designers, our indefatigable Learn Team leaders, well know, and intended. “Who cares?” can have a derogatory sense. It can sound, well, crass. It can be a statement that ends a conversation. Who cares? Evidence that someone, that anyone, does is not always obvious. The world is a mess, on so many levels.

And then we have today’s gospel reading from Mark. In terms of a creation theme, it does mention an animal, a dog. Might there be something there for the preacher to work with? For Rally Day, something light-hearted, kid-friendly, fun? I’m reminded of the movie *Shakespeare in Love* and of a comment made by the character played by Geoffrey Rush. Rush is the owner of the theater for which the young Shakespeare is writing a play—the movie is set early in the bard’s career—and Rush’s character is eager that the playwright write, that he actually finish a play, just finish it—and make it something people want to see. Rush’s character likes comedy, and is thinking of the finances, too, about of the viability of it all, he’s both anxious and encouraging and a little inept. He suggests to Shakespeare, “Put a dog in it. Love and a bit with a dog, that’s what people want.”

Perhaps. But do we want the bit with the dog, to be Jesus calling someone a name? That’s where the dog comes in in today’s gospel. Someone comes to Jesus for help on behalf of their child and Jesus compares them to dogs. Jesus’ comment sounds, well, crass. You would think it would put an end to the conversation, and you may be excused for wondering, as people have for centuries: What is this story about? How is this good news?

Well, for one thing, there is when, and where, the story happens. Setting is important narratively, temporally, geographically. We’re not that far into Mark’s gospel, but Jesus is far from his home turf. Tyre, the region where today’s story takes place, is quite a distance from Galilee, the Jewish villages where Jesus has begun his ministry. In many ways it’s surprising that Jesus is even there, way up in Tyre. It’s a whole different world; it’s not a place that for generations has known the God of Israel and the promise of a Messiah. Still, somehow, word of Jesus has made its way there. So even though Jesus is trying to keep a low profile, even though there’s the sense that he’s gone up there for some time away, he is unable to escape notice. The gospel tells us about one person in particular who hunts him out. The gospel says that this person is a woman, a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. Note that in this very brief story—Mark’s gospel is like that, brief, terse even—in this story that doesn’t use a lot of words, there is a three part emphasis on all the ways that this person is different from Jesus: she’s a woman, a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin; different in gender, religion, and race. Nevertheless, she seeks him out, and bows down before him, and begs on behalf of her child, her little girl, who also would be different from Jesus in all these ways and in age as well. This mother is desperate, her child is demon-possessed. Please Jesus, help her.

And Jesus calls her a dog. Basically. Jesus says this thing about feeding children first, how it would be unfair to take children’s food and toss it to dogs. We take this to mean that Jesus is to help the people of Israel first, and that he doesn’t over sentimentalize dogs.

It's hard to know what to make of this, reading this today. Of course, we don't know the tone in which it is said. Some interpreters think that Jesus is teasing; this feels like a bit of a stretch to me. Others explain that Jesus is tired, which may be true, different things come out of your mouth when you are tired, but still, Jesus. Still others say that he is seeing just how far this woman will go, that he is testing her.

It seems to me that if anyone is getting tested here, it's Jesus. If anyone is being given a test about how far they will go, it's Jesus. I think that's what this story is about. You could say it's what the whole gospel is about: about how far God goes, how very far, for us. Note, too, how in the role of test administrator, the gospel casts a most unlikely person, especially for the world in which it is set. The person who engages Jesus, who gives him a prompt, is a woman, a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. That the gospel gives her this role is remarkable, especially if you remember how Mark's gospel takes a pretty dim view of human comprehension and capability. In Mark, Jesus' disciples are never getting what Jesus means, they fall asleep, run away, say stupid things. Not this woman. She goes right up to Jesus and doesn't budge, her eyes are wide open to what can be done and she articulates it, adroitly. She takes what Jesus says and uses the very same terms—problematic as they may be—to up the ante, to make a greater theological point, to iterate a truth that has been sounded throughout the Hebrew scriptures and is personified in Jesus, this truth: the God of Israel is overabundant; the table God sets cannot contain all the grace to be shared, there's more than enough, even a crumb contains worlds. With a fierce need, and a firm stance, and a quick wit, this Gentile, Syrophenician woman reminds Jesus what he's about: healing, saving, driving out demons.

She probably has no way of knowing, but we can recall that in this gospel Jesus' inaugural act was casting out a demon. That's how it begins, according to Mark, with Jesus announcing the good news and then enacting it, with an exorcism. In today's story, Jesus again casts out a demon, but does so on foreign soil, thereby announcing that the good news has no border. Note, too, that in today's scene, the person who is demon-possessed, the daughter, is not even there, so this is also first, a healing at a distance, a further emphasis this story makes of the expansiveness of God's power. That's what this story is about: how big God's love is.

But it's not just about that. It's also about how to believe it—how to believe in the good news. How do you do that? That may be even more difficult than this story. How do we believe in this big good news? We'll all say that we do, it's part of the creed, which will say just after the sermon as we receive new members, we're all invited to say, "I believe," but what does that even mean? Sometimes, I think, the question of belief can have a derogatory sense to it, as if it's something just for children, or as if it's something you have—and you probably don't. And if not you can just go to [#\$\*!] And there ends the conversation. In a crass world, it can be hard to believe.

We are grown-up enough to admit what a mess we've made of the earth, we are grown up to admit what what a mess we make of relationships, how divided we are by race, religion, and gender. Dire as things are, we are no more desperate than this Gentile, Syrophenician woman. We are no more desperate than she, and we would be wise to recognize her for the model she is. She is a model for how to believe, for how to interpret the good news into our lives, how to be open to it, and to open it up for a sick and suffering world. How do we do this? By doing what she does: by being courageous and tenacious in the hunt for healing; by crossing boundaries on behalf of others; by putting ourselves next to holiness and holding it to account, by having our wits about us and using them, that there may be abundance for all, for all of God's creation. Who cares? Here's how.