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“Faith That Works 2: Table Manners”

Proverbs 22:1-2;8-9-22-23 Mark 7:24-30 James 2:1-17

INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS 22:1-2;8-9-22-23

Last week we heard from the book of James how true religion involved visiting widows and orphans in their time of distress. In some ways the book of James is the New Testament version of Proverbs. This morning’s sampling deals with how we are to treat others, especially those who are poor. Hear the Word of the Lord from Proverbs 22:1-2;8-9-22-23

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 7:24-30

This morning we are going to read about a woman who was in no position to ask anything of Jesus, and yet she did. She had remarkable faith--faith enough to beg in spite of a less than warm welcome. Hear the word of the Lord from Mark 7:24-30.

Let’s pray. Dear Lord, Thank you for this, your word. Open our eyes to see, our minds to understand, our hearts to receive your word. Open my lips to share what you have given to me and prepare us all to be changed in a way that we may respond to this your word through the power of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

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President Coolidge once invited some friends from Vermont to dine at the White House. They were worried about their table manners, so they decided to do everything their host did. All went well until coffee was served. Coolidge poured his into the saucer. The guests did the same. The President added sugar and cream. So did the visitors. Then Coolidge leaned over and placed his saucer on the floor for the cat.

Those of us who have, or have had dogs for pets, know what longing looks they can cast from underneath a dinner table. Even though we try our best some of us are not able to teach them not to beg...to teach them proper “under the table manners.” Apparently some cats and dogs have the ability to train their masters.

A friend of mine said that dogs are a best example of unconditional love. They are devoted. They are always glad to see you. They have forgotten the last time you hurt them, and don’t carry it with them forever. In fact, I have a friend who said to me, “If people behaved like dogs the world would be a much better place.”

I once saw a sign that said, “A dog’s tail never lies.” I saw a pillow once that had the following embroidered on it, “May I live to be the kind of person my dog thinks I am.” One day I was talking to Josh Higginbotham, who by the way celebrated his birthday this week by coming home from the hospital where he has been

since May, and we were talking about dogs and I quoted the pillow to Josh. Josh challenged me to write that in a song. And I did. It's called "Best Friend."

Some dogs may have been beloved in Jesus' day, but generally, for someone in Jesus' day to call someone a dog, especially a non-Jew, was not a term of endearment. But this woman didn't let that deter her.

Jill Duffield points out how this story stands in stark contrast with other encounters Jesus had. In Mark 5:22-24, a man named Jairus, who was a leader of the synagogue, falls at Jesus' feet on behalf of his little daughter. All we get in Mark 5:24 is this: "So he (Jesus) went with him." No refusal, no questions, no name calling, no nothing. So a male, Jewish leader got a no questions asked positive response versus an unnamed Gentile woman being called a dog and told to mind her own business.

In Luke 13:10 Jesus gets in trouble for healing a woman on the Sabbath - a woman he noticed, not one who sought him out. Jesus calls the leader of the synagogue who opposed Jesus doing this on the Sabbath a hypocrite, proclaiming that this "daughter of Abraham" deserves to be set free. Why did Jesus heal this daughter of Abraham and initially rebuff the pleading Gentile mother's little girl? Was it because she was a daughter of Abraham and the Syro-Phoenician woman was not?

OR Is it possible that Jesus is saying what his disciples were thinking to show them how prejudicial and how "racist" they were?

Brian Blount, president and professor of New Testament at Union Presbyterian Seminary, has an interesting take on this scene. He writes that he thinks "Jesus was using this moment as a teaching opportunity for the disciples who still found it difficult to move with him all the way in his boundary breaking efforts.

Blount says that Jesus finds the woman's response remarkable and therefore so should we. The woman who humbled herself even to the point of accepting the racial slur against her... came back with bravery and brilliance and was able to both stand down and stand up in order to save her daughter.

The woman answered Jesus by saying in essence, "It is true. I admit that I am a dog. I realize that I have no claim upon you. But I still need you to heal my daughter. Lord, even the dogs eat the scraps from the master's table. "Throw me a bone. Drop me a crumb. Never mind table manners (or under the table manners), I'll settle for table scraps." It's not like I'm asking for myself. It's for my little girl. I'm a dog that is begging YOU to heal!" (heel)

Like a gem collector always on the lookout for fine jewels. Jesus always kept an eye out for faith. He did not always find it in his disciples. In fact, on no occasion that we know did he ever say of Peter, James, and John: "Great is your faith."

More often than not the words he spoke to them were, “O ye of little faith.” But Jesus responded to her request because he recognized her faith. To her Jesus could have said, “O she of Great Faith.”

1) The first thing she had to do was Have Faith. Her faith consisted mainly in the fact that she turned to Jesus for help. That was quite remarkable when you remember that she was a traditional enemy of the Jews. It was as real and deep an enmity as exists today between today’s Palestinians and Jews or between ethnic groups in our world today.

2) The second thing she had to do was to put her Faith to Work. There was no great exercise of intellect involved. She didn’t know any dogmas or creed. Her faith simply existed in the fact that she came to Jesus for help in a situation where she had exhausted all of her own resources. She did not belong to a synagogue; she may not have known the Torah, but she had a need and that was enough.

It takes faith to go to God for help and at the same time admit that we have no claim upon him. It takes faith to go to God having nothing that we have done to merit his mercy, in no position to make demands.

We’re all like that woman. We have nothing to present that would merit God’s mercy or God’s healing. When it comes to God, we’re all beggars. If we are to be commended for our great faith like she was, we all need to be like puppies that have NOT been taught not to beg.

A couple of Sundays from now we will be celebrating Evangelism Sunday with our Bluegrass service. One of the best definitions of evangelism I have ever heard comes from the evangelist D.T. Niles of India. He said, “Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread.”

Apparently even in the country of Tyre, the beggars had been telling one another where they found the Bread ... of LIFE! Word had gotten around that a Jewish rabbi was coming to town. The people recognized him and they sent word throughout the region. Word of the things that Jesus had been able to do spreads to the point that a woman hears about it and hope springs up within her.

This woman had everything going against her. She was a Syrian refugee. She was a Phoenician who was born in Syria. She was one of the hyphenated. She was a Syro-Phoenician (like today’s African-Americans or Mexican-Americans or Asian-Americans or ... Native-Americans –who are the ones who deserve to be called Americans...or North Americans- no hyphen. ☺)

Because of where she was born, she was not fully accepted where she lived. We don’t know if she had a husband, or if she was a widow, but we do know that she had at least one child, a daughter. This woman might have been an outsider,

but she was also a person of faith. She had heard of God's power at work in Jesus, and so she asked him to help her daughter. She had Faith that Worked.

For what are you desperate? What need in you is so great that it makes you a beggar? What is it that you want or need that you would dare to bring to Jesus? Maybe it's for your daughter or your son, your granddaughter or your grandson, your spouse, your neighbor your boss your coworker. Maybe it's something for this church, this community, your child's school. Maybe it's for you.

How can we facilitate the casting out of demons that torment so many in our world? What is so important that we must endure name-calling and refuse to give up? How can we be in solidarity with the "dogs" of our time and place?

Don't let your pride keep you from asking. Don't let your sense of propriety or class or race or status or fear of bucking the status quo keep you from coming to Jesus to ask for help.

Because this mother sought, because she asked, because she begged, because she wouldn't take for an answer, she got what Jesus had to give.

One of the most important things the story of this mother who came to Jesus has to tell us is that Jesus expanded God's Family Circle to include all kinds and all tribes of people. No one is outside the boundaries of his love. Everyone has the potential of receiving the response Jesus gave to the woman who begged.

The verses we read from James' letter warn that discrimination is not limited to ethnicity. The folks James was warning were of the same ethnicity, but were from different classes. He warned against showing preferential treatment to the rich at the expense of those who were poor. He said, "You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: but if you show partiality you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." Not only is God's family expanded to the point where we are not to show partiality to any one ethnicity we are not to do it to any one station in life.

Last Sunday we came to the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. That table is always open to all who call on his name, who come to him as beggars who come to be nourished by the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. As always, it is an open table, one where all are welcome no matter what ethnicity, gender, marital status, or social stratus. It is that way because Jesus showed how shallow it can be to look down on another person in need because of who they are or where they are from or how much money they have to put in the plate.

Much more than President Woodrow Wilson, who poured coffee in his saucer for his cat, in Jesus we have a host who reaches out to those who were considered to be "dogs." Jesus is a host who, if we follow and do everything he did, we will

have a Faith that Works, that works itself out resulting in impeccable...spiritual...table manners.

Let us pray. O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us. Unite us in bonds of love. Through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth so that, in your good time, people of every nation may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne.

Out of the darkness we cry to you, O God. Enable us to find in Christ the faith to trust your care even in the midst of pain. Assure us that we do not walk alone through the valley of the shadow, but that your light is leading us into life.

O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams.

God, call us into a deeper relationship to be your church for the sake of the world. Help us to see with new eyes the injustices within church and society. Call us to have a loving heart that respects and uplifts the humanity and dignity of every person; open our ears to listen to and learn from the experiences of people of color. Open our mouths to speak up and about injustices. Join us with others to work for racial equity and inclusion for all people.

Let us not rush to the language of healing, before understanding the fullness of the injury and the depth of the wound. Let us not rush to offer a band-aid, when the gaping wound requires surgery and complete reconstruction. Let us not offer false equivalencies, thereby diminishing the particular pain being felt in a particular circumstance in a particular historical moment. Let us not speak of reconciliation without speaking of reparations and restoration, or how we can repair the breach and how we can restore the loss.

Let us not value property over people; let us not protect material objects while human lives hang in the balance. Let us not value a false peace over a righteous justice. Let us not be afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life in community together. Let us not offer clichés to the grieving, those whose hearts are being torn asunder.

Let us call for the mourning men and the wailing women, those willing to rend their garments of privilege and ease. Let us be humble and listen to the pain, rage and grief pouring from the lips of our neighbors and friends. Let us decrease, so that our brothers and sisters who live on the underside of history

may increase. Let us pray with our eyes open and our feet firmly planted on the ground. Let us be silent when we don't know what to say. \* Amen

\*Prayers adapted from Prayers for Intercession and a Litany For Those Who Aren't Ready For Healing from the 2015 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

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To be read before the Benediction:

This coming Tuesday will be the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City. I saw an article in which the author was worrying about 9/11 burnout. It said people were tiring of being reminded of something they would like to forget

After 9/11 I received this untitled poem which still speaks to me that we should remember the good with the bad this coming Tuesday.

As the soot and dirt and ash rained down,  
 We became one color.  
 As we carried each other down the stairs of the burning building,  
 We became one class.  
 As we lit candles of waiting and hoping,  
 We became one generation.  
 As the firefighters and police officers fought their way into the inferno,  
 We became one gender.  
 As we fell to our knees in prayer for strength,  
 We became one faith.  
 As we whispered or shouted words of encouragement,  
 We spoke one language.  
 As we gave our blood in lines a mile long,  
 We became one body.  
 As we mourned together the great loss,  
 We became one family.  
 As we cried tears of grief and loss,  
 We became one soul.  
 As we retell with pride the sacrifice of heroes,  
 We become one people. 1

1 Dr. Larry Bethune, 'From Remembrance to Hope'