

Sunday, September 9 + 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 7:24-37

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This Gospel reading is a perfect expression of God's abundance. Abundance of what? Of God's love, a power that is stronger than anything else in the universe: Love brought everything into being. Of Christ's mercy, which flows to us in endless measures of forgiveness, which we never deserve, is always waiting for us, and costs us nothing. Jesus stands with us no matter what. And of hope, with which the Spirit fills our hearts to overflowing. All this in the form of a simple woman with an unlikely request of Jesus, Son of David, Son of God.

This reading also reminds us that God's reign, which broke into the world through Jesus Christ, is neither easily regulated nor carefully distributed. The abundance this kingdom promises has a tendency to burst the seams and to spill out in all directions. Abundance, by definition, is something that exists in such large quantities that it can't be regulated or contained. But most importantly, this passage expands our understanding of what counts as real faith.

Here in Mark 7 we encounter the brief account of a woman who refuses to take "No" for an answer. Jesus has traveled to a distant region for some unknown purpose. He's trying to keep his presence there a secret, but this woman finds him anyway. She is

from Syrochene, a Roman province in Syria. In other words, she is a Gentile and not a Jew. Her daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit, and the woman is desperate to have her cured. She bows at Jesus' feet and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

It's fascinating to compare this story with the way it's told in Matthew Chapter 15. Matthew, Mark, and Luke come from the same general tradition and share many of the same reports about Jesus. We know Mark was the earliest, so we can observe how Matthew and Luke embellish these stories from their own cultural perspectives.

Mark tells us that "She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter." Begging by definition means that, at least at first, one's request is not granted. Otherwise it would just be asking. Matthew runs with this idea and portrays this woman in much more vigorous terms. I didn't watch any of the Supreme Court nominee hearings, but from what I read it might have been like that. In Matthew the woman is repeatedly shouting at Jesus: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, for my daughter is tormented by a demon! Have mercy on me, Lord! Have mercy!" In Matthew Jesus doesn't respond, and the disciples—who aren't present in Mark—keep telling Jesus to send her away "because she keeps shouting after us."

The scene is less boisterous in Mark, but the result is the same: Jesus refuses—at first. He shocks our sensibilities by telling the woman, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The reference to dogs isn't as bad as it sounds; house dogs of the time were much appreciated in cleaning up

the floor beneath the dinner table, as they still are today. We called our beloved Golden Retriever Sparky a “human vacuum cleaner.”

Jesus’ refusal may shock us too. Why doesn't he just do it? Isn't he endlessly merciful and compassionate?

In saying "Let the children be fed *first*," Jesus implies that the time is not right. Blessings *will* come to non-Jewish people, in time, he is implying, but for now his work is on behalf of Jews. His answer is not "Absolutely not," but "Not just yet."

Others find it difficult to believe that a divine Jesus could be persuaded to change his mind about something.

What’s most fascinating about this interaction is that the woman does not take Jesus’ initial refusal as his final answer. We probably can’t imagine arguing with Jesus. But this woman does. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She is making the point that the abundance of mercy Jesus proclaims is available to Gentiles just as it is to Jews. The crumbs that fall from the table, representing the abundance that Jesus brings, are still from the same source.

In fact, Jesus is impressed by her logic—so impressed that he *does* change his mind. She is right that there is not only enough, but *more* than enough. Feeding 5,000 people? No problem, and there are plenty of leftovers. God’s undeserved mercy, which we call grace, is limitless and available to all hearts that are open. “For saying that,” Jesus tells her, “you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

Today we celebrate this nameless woman for the persistence of her faith. Did you notice something else in the reading? Her faith is so strong that she heads for home fully trusting that Jesus has cured her daughter, just as he said. Not, “Well, when I get home I’ll see if what you promised really came true.”

Do we possess that same persistence of faith? Sometimes it’s hard to muster when the forces of evil that are still active in the world tempt us to just give up.

Consider the Roman Catholic Church in Pennsylvania. A few weeks ago, just before school started, a grand jury report was released that accused 300 Catholic "predator priests" of abusing more than a thousand children over the years in six Pennsylvania dioceses, including Pittsburgh, where 99 of those priests served.

The huge report tells in painful detail how Church officials regularly chose to protect accused priests, and the Church itself, instead of protecting children. This was perpetuated according to what the grand jury called a "playbook for concealing the truth." Accused priests were sent to church-run psychiatric centers and subjected to half-hearted investigations by their fellow clergy. If a priest was removed from his position, parishioners were not told why, and the priests were often transferred to a new parish where the congregation was unaware of the accusations against him. One person’s response was probably typical of many church members: “You're angry, and you're heartbroken, and your faith is a bit shaken,” he said.

Now a new school year has begun, and some parents and church leaders apparently refuse to acknowledge the truth revealed in the report. This refusal does not

strengthen their faith, it weakens it. A story I heard on the radio about Pittsburgh reported that, on the first day of the new year at one elementary school where there were documented instances of abuse, nothing was said about what had taken place, and no words were offered about how to be on the alert for it in the future. A Catholic high school parent who was also interviewed said that this had not shaken the faith of her two children, because she had told them that priests are just people, and what happened was not the fault of the church. But these priests did not behave as we would expect “just people” would, and perpetuation of the abuse *was* the fault of the church.

Back to the woman in our Gospel reading. Persistence is defined as “firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition.” To be persistent in our faith, as this woman was, we must first see things as they really are. Although she was an outsider, somehow this woman clearly saw the abundance of grace that Jesus was proclaiming, and recognized the power of the “food,” so to speak, that he was distributing. She did not pretend to be anything other than what she was. *“Look, Mister, I'm not asking for a seat at the table. My daughter is suffering. All I need from you is a crumb or two. I know that will do the job. But I'm going to need it right now. Parents of really sick children don't wait around.”*

The elementary school whose leaders said nothing shielded parents and students from the truth. The faith the Catholic high school mom was instilling in her children also shielded them from the truth. Those on the receiving end cannot see things as they

really are, and so whatever faith they think they might have in the church cannot be fully authentic.

Things happen all the time that have the capacity to badly shake our faith, just as revelations of priestly abuse have all over the world. What things, in our sphere of life? The suicide of a family member, or friend, or mentor, such as the popular young lead pastor of a megachurch in Chino, California, who committed suicide last week. Their faith in their spiritual leaders is shaken. A nation that is so deeply divided that we can't even believe it's gotten to this point. Faith in the principle of democracy on which this country was founded is shaken. People who recklessly kill innocent bystanders. People who intentionally kill innocent bystanders. Mass murderers. Faith in the goodness of humanity is shaken.

Persistence in faith means never letting go of the conviction that God in Christ through the Holy Spirit is always at work in the world, and that evil will never triumph over love. Persistence in faith means clinging to Jesus as a certain presence in circumstances of life, comforting us in our sorrow and leading us with his rod and staff through the darkest valleys. Persistence in faith means that we live out of the conviction that God's love is always flowing into our hearts, and that it overflows into the world as we give it back to God in greater measure by loving and serving our neighbors.

Faith without works is dead, James tells us in today's second reading. Each of you is a person of great faith. I know this by looking into your eyes. I also know that God is

calling each of you to express your faith through your own unique gifts in a world that is starving for the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ.

I invite you to consider how your faith may be uniquely expressed in the life of this congregation. We are the church, the body of Christ in the world, a living, breathing, organic entity that is trying to live into the fullness of life in Christ, just as is any human being. How can your faith contribute to the well-being of this body—and not just its health, but its flourishing? All things are possible with God, and all things are possible here. Be bold in your persistence in faith, and let's really see this place come alive.

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