

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 5, 2021

Psalm 146:1–10 (ESV):

146 Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

3 Put not your trust in princes,

in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

4 When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;

on that very day his plans perish.

5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the LORD his God,

6 who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them,

who keeps faith forever;

7 who executes justice for the oppressed,

who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

the LORD loves the righteous.

9 The LORD watches over the sojourners;

he upholds the widow and the fatherless,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

10 The LORD will reign forever,

your God, O Zion, to all generations.

Praise the LORD!

First Reading: Isaiah 35:4–6 (ESV):

4 Say to those who have an anxious heart,

“Be strong; fear not!

Behold, your God

will come with vengeance,

with the recompense of God.

He will come and save you.”

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

For waters break forth in the wilderness,

and streams in the desert

EPISTLE: James 2:1–10; 14-18 (ESV):

The Sin of Partiality

2 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

Faith Without Works Is Dead

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 7:24-37 (ESV):

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

24 And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. 25 But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." 28 But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." 30 And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Jesus Heals a Deaf Man

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. 34 And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Sermon 36 – Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Dog Eat Bread”

Mark 7:24-30

Dear friends,

More Mark today, as Jesus demonstrates the principles He has been previously talking about in the Gospel lesson. Why is Jesus here? Why did God take on flesh and dwell among us? We know the answers to these questions but it teaches us a lot to look at how Jesus chooses to show it. That's what's going on here, show not tell. Jesus is showing that He is here to save all people, from the greatest to the least, and that we are not worthy of Him, we don't deserve Him. Both are important, as you'll see. This has something to do with highly outdated Jewish laws of clean and unclean, but while we don't pay attention to clean or unclean anymore, those laws still have something to teach us. They teach us that we are unclean, they teach us that Jesus has come to make us clean, and they teach us important nuances in how we are supposed to look at ourselves and at others.

This entire section is an examination of that whole concept. Who is worthy of God? Who matters to God, and why do they matter to God? Jesus has told them that this isn't about food, and he's told them that it isn't precisely about behavior either. Now He goes into origin, bloodline, birth. Does it matter who your mother and father was? Yes. But also no.

“24 And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. 25 But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him

and came and fell down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth.” Tyre and Sidon is Syrophenician turf, which means this lady has a mixture of bloodlines, none of them Jewish. She's a mutt, a crossbreed of local and probably Philistine blood. The Philistines were Phoenicians, so this gal comes from two peoples that are Israel's ancient enemies. Israel fought wars with both the local tribes as well as the Phoenicians, so there's hostility on that level too. Despite this, the woman is desperate, Jesus cannot be hidden, the word about Him has spread everywhere, so she comes to this Jewish miracle worker to plead her case.

Understand that this woman has no right, strictly speaking, to do this, which Jesus is going to highlight. Gentiles were outside the people, and God Himself had said that the two were not to intermix. Gentiles were supposed to be outside, not among the people. The people had to live around them but they were not supposed to live with them, God wanted His people to be different. He wanted His people to be apart, separate. The Gentiles were very much thought of this way as well. It is not as if the Jews thought this woman could never be saved, its not like a guarantee she's going to hell, but there was a process for that. She had to change her faith and change a lot about her in order to be considered one of God's people. Racial differences mattered to these people, because back then, racial differences mattered to God. He told them to do it this way.

This accounts for Jesus' rather strange words to this lady. **“And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”** We often think this a tragedy. A sweet little girl gets possessed by a demon. It is sad, very much so, but it is also exactly what she deserved. This little girl, and her mother, are both unclean. They are Gentiles, which means they are unclean, full stop. So, why is it a surprise that people that are unclean are possessed by unclean spirits? It shouldn't be. This world is the devil's playground, never forget that. Anyone who doesn't belong to Jesus belongs to the devil. It is that simple and that harsh. Did this girl choose this? No. Did her mother? Maybe. It

doesn't say. But choice doesn't matter nearly as much as we think it does. This is this girl's destiny, she already belonged to the devil the day she was conceived. When you go out in the rain, you get wet. If you're unclean, chances are you might get an unclean spirit.

Jesus takes the time to remind her of this. He compares His teaching, His gifts, His miracles, to bread, and says that I'm here to give these things to God's children. I'm here for those that believe in me. I want you to see this. Jesus does not tell her that where she is born, where she lives, doesn't matter. He doesn't tell her that her Gentile blood isn't important. Rather, He tells her the opposite. It matters very much. The things I can do don't belong to you, lady. They aren't for you. They're for my children, and you are not one of them. Hard words, but they need to be said. God did not mandate the separation between Jews and Gentiles for His entertainment, He didn't do this as a suggestion or a joke. He wanted His people to be holy and to have nothing to do with the unholy, including having nothing to do with unholy people.

To us, this is just awful. This is terribly elitist, high-minded, and arrogant, and there is nothing that makes Americans get more riled up than people who walk around pretending they're better than us. To us, what Jesus is doing is sinful. He's daring to tell a lady that she's not worth it, daring to tell someone that they're basically just getting what they deserved. This is what I want you to see, Jesus is doing that, but He's doing it for a reason.

I remind you that Jesus went here himself. He is in Tyre and Sidon not by accident, His car didn't break down, He went to Gentile territory on His own to do this. If Jesus were as uptight and full of himself as He sounds to us, then why is He even here? That's what gives us a clue that there's more going on here. So what is it? If Jesus is not there to tell the peasants just how going to hell they are, what's He doing? The clue is in the next verse. **"28 But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the**

demon has left your daughter.” 30 And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.”

Jesus doesn't tell her to go away. He engages with her. He does so with tough words, reminding her that she is a dog. She isn't part of the family because she is not a Jew. But He doesn't chase her off, He wants her to know exactly who she is and what she's asking for. You don't deserve anything from me, lady, but I'm going to give it to you anyway. And He does. Do you see the interplay here? Jesus is maintaining that separation that God established, He doesn't waver on that. This woman doesn't deserve a scrap from God, she's not part of the family. But Jesus doesn't abandon His compassion. He listens to her, hears her case, and ultimately gives her the redemption she seeks.

To us, compassion would be, necessarily, not caring about the woman's bloodline. We are trained to do this, and society shovels it on us constantly, we're practically gagging on it these days. Compassion means you treat people as people, regardless of how they're born or where they come from. That works fine for us here in this world, but Jesus is here not just to give people things, but to get people to realize exactly what it is they need. What do we need? Holiness. Forgiveness. Redemption. We need to be saved from what we are, we need to be saved from our sin.

Jesus holds hard on this lady because He wants her to see what she is. She doesn't deserve Him or anything He has to offer. He does the same for you. He will hold you hard sometimes, with His words maybe, sometimes with what He does, though it's awfully hard to tell *why* God does the things He does in our life. He will hold you at arm's length so you understand exactly who you are and what you do. Jesus is not doing this to her or to you to rub it in. He's doing this to get you to see your need for Him, and your need for His forgiveness, His holiness. He tells her that who she is is very much a big deal, and He's about to make that big deal into a big act of grace.

God maintains separation, which we find foul, loathsome, and arrogant. He maintains the separation between good and evil, clean and unclean, and we all fall

squarely in the evil and unclean category. In this story God shows us *why* He does this, which is to cross that boundary Himself and bring us firmly into what is good. He draws the line and says, you're over there, you're evil, you're sinful, but He does this so we can see just how thick that line is, we cannot cross it. But He can, and HE does. He reaches across the line and pulls us into the other side, the side of righteousness and holiness. This Syrophenician lady wasn't one of the children, she was one of the dogs. So are we all. Dogs that don't deserve a place at the table, or a bite of the food of forgiveness that God offers us. That is precisely why Jesus shows up at all, because He knows we don't deserve it. We don't earn it, He gives it nonetheless. He gave the woman back her little girl from the curse of an unclean spirit. He gives you the same. Your spirits were unclean before Jesus rescued you, saved you from that fate. Were you demon-possessed? I doubt it, but you weren't saved, and despite our pride, we frankly shouldn't be saved. But God? He loves us too much to let us go, He loves us too much to leave us unclean.

Amen