

St. Mary's Episcopal Church

James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Proper 18, Year B / September 5, 2021

Message by The Rev. Michael Burke



Good morning. I want to begin with a confession. I've been thinking all week about a few things that happened *last week*, here on the campus of St. Mary's, during Sunday 10 am outdoor worship.

Now, I realize that most of you were with us through the miracles of Zoom, a few dozen more on Facebook live, and maybe a couple on Twitch. That left about 85 people in person up on the hill at Lake Otis and Tudor, gathered amongst the festival tents in the parking lot.

As we were setting up, I struck up a conversation with Bobbie, a young woman who had joined us. Bobbie was having a hard morning, and was responding to some stimuli that I couldn't see and hear: to the extent that it was a little difficult having a conversation with her.

I had introduced myself, and I asked her when she ate last, a question I sometimes find myself asking to numerous folks who wander through our campus in the course of any given week. She said that she was hungry, so I gave her five dollars to walk over to McDonald's and get herself something to eat.

She came back about twenty minutes later, still before the beginning of the service, and told me that she had bought a couple people over at Starbucks a cup of coffee on her.

During the service, she laid her head down on the pavement and looked to be carrying on a conversation with someone who was not present. She wasn't particularly disruptive, and most folks at St. Mary's are used to folks struggling with various mental challenges coming and going in the community.

But she was sitting all alone on a patch of asphalt, and looked rather isolated. And I'm up at the makeshift altar or Eucharistic table leading portions of the prayers.

It was then that I saw Ross McKay, one of our leaders here at St. Mary's, quietly up and sit down beside her.

Years ago, we were blessed to have a priest at St. Mary's by the name of Sara Gavit, who used to pay attention, she said, to the many ways in which Jesus would visit us in the stranger's guise. I'm not sure who was Jesus last week, Bobbie or Ross, but there was something going on over there in that little patch of pavement, and I've been pondering it all week.

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The Scripture readings for Sunday include the passage from the New Testament Book of James,

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in Jesus? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

After the worship service was over on Sunday, and as people were gathering for some goodbyes and thank-yous to Catherine Amy, Bobbie was at one of the tables with some cake and a small plate of cookies. But over behind her, was a woman in a car that was filled to overflowing with what looked like miscellaneous papers and personal belongings. I immediately thought to myself, "here is someone who is living in her car." I went over and struck up a conversation, and I found out something interesting. This was the first service at St. Mary's that she had ever attended, and she was there that Sunday because one of our long-time members had specifically invited her. She told me that Dr. Brian Donaldson had met her elsewhere in town in a parking lot earlier that week, and had struck up a conversation with her and invited her to come be with us at Sunday worship.

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I don't think that is unusual. The old canard is that the average Episcopalian, always trying to be unobtrusive and polite, invites someone new to church with them once every 34 years. Now, in my experience that isn't true at all, and I strongly suspect that Dr. Brian invites people he meets around town to church quite regularly. And I wondered, "Why don't I do that? Why don't we all do that?" Why don't I befriend random, seemingly isolated people that I meet, and invite them into community? What does Dr. Brian know and live out that I still struggle to fully embrace?

After church, my spouse Nancy and I met up with a long-lost seminary classmate who was in town, and we all had lunch together out on the outside deck at 49th Street Brewing Company. Later that evening, at home, I was emptying my pants pocket and found the receipt for the meal – the cost was over a hundred dollars. And I was suddenly struck with the discrepancy between the five dollars I gave Bobbie for breakfast at the beginning of the day, and the sum I had just spent at lunch. And then I remembered that Bobbie had actually spent her five dollars on coffee for other people.

In the Gospel for today, Jesus is hiding out at a friend's house, and yet he could not escape notice. A woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin.

If you remember right, Syrophenicians were outsiders to Israel. They hailed from the coastal cities like Tyre, about 12 miles north of the borders of modern day Israel, and they occupied the margins between the Jewish and Gentile worlds. In the modern language of intersectionality, we would say she was triply marginalized by the culture of the time – a woman, an foreigner, and a Gentile. She begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Throughout the history of biblical scholarship, much has been made of this passage to highlight the woman's faith. In fact, this passage often is subtitled in Bible translations as "The Faith of the Syrophenician Woman." But of course the text as originally written didn't have section headings or subtitles. Many scholars have avoided any suggestion that Jesus was being cruel, and have written that he said this to test her faith. Perhaps.

However, I think Jesus was simply naming out loud the predicament they were in, by reciting what may have been a common folk saying within the Jewish community at the time. "Dogs" were ritually unclean and the word was a pejorative, an insult. Yes, it's true that Jesus softens it a bit by using the term "little dogs" as is implied here by the Greek ([Greek](#): κυνάρια, *kynarioi*), but it is still a naming out loud of the social hierarchies implicit in the culture of the times.

Remember also, that Jesus *begins* his adult ministry with a self-understanding of his own calling and vocation as first, perhaps only, to the lost sheep of Israel, that is, his Jewish kinfolk. But then, as the scripture's sacred story develops, this limited sense of mission expands until, at the end of Book, we are

given a vision of “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...” from Revelation 7:9.

So, I wonder, are we seeing here a shift in Jesus’s own self-understanding, and his understanding of the reach and purposes of God in creation?? Is the ever-present Spirit, speaking here through “the least of these,” in the stranger’s guise of one locked out on the wrong side of the door, beyond the reach of community?

Because she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

In my mind’s eye, I imagine her saying this in full recognition of the social distance between herself and Jesus, the full weight of oppression, and yet the desperation of one whose daughter is very ill.

For a moment, it seems to me that the fate of the young girl’s life, and even more so, the fate of the Gospel itself, hangs in the balance. But then the sheer humanity of Jesus, or perhaps the fullness of God that dwells within, makes the shift - from a small limited vision, bound by culture and kinship - vision to the glory of God’s vision in its all of its spectacular and unsettling fullness and glory.

Then Jesus said to the woman, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

But has the demon left *us*? The demons that inhabit the dividing line, the color bar, the structures and upbringing and common discomforts that keep one segment of the human family from community with another segment? The demons that still make us uncomfortable with others who lives are so different from our own? Whose daily struggles seems so foreign and perhaps frightening to us? Why are we segmented or separated at all, when we say with our lips that all are one in Christ Jesus?

This Syrophonecian woman is unnamed in the Gospels, but it is interesting that 3rd or 4th century Christian writings ascribed the name “Justa” to her, meaning Justice.¹

To go back and revisit the first reading passage from James again, “*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?*”

And then, in the remainder of the Gospel passage for today, Mark follows this passage with a story of Jesus opening the ears and releasing the tongue or speech of a man who could neither hear nor speak plainly. “Eph-pha’tha,” that is, “Be opened.”

If it sounds like a healing story, that’s what it is. But all of Jesus’s parables and actions can be understood on two levels: When Jesus says “Be opened,” is he speaking only of the ears and speech of the man before him?

¹ See Clementine Writings, from the 3rd and 4th century, especially “Recognitions.”
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clementine_literature#Origin_and_date_hypotheses

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So, I've been reflecting on last Sunday, and on the Scripture passages for today, all this past week. Like the children at Godly Play, I keep saying to myself,, "I wonder..." "I wonder..."

What keeps us from living boldly and proclaiming loudly, not just with our lips but with our lives, the radical re-ordering of humanity that is revealed in the healing of the daughter of the Syrophonecian woman?

What keeps me from fully approaching those in our world who live on the margins of our community, who come on foot and in cars loaded with belongings? What do Bobbie and Ross and Dr. Brian and the Woman-In-The-Car know of the in-breaking reign of God that I am still unable to see and speak of clearly?

How shall I approach our sometime visitors not as 'the exotic other,' or "cases of charity, with myself positioned as the one who brings help and assistance," but rather as myself as one who still has so much to learn about "walking-alongside", about "compassion", about "grace, community, and healing"?

How can I better be in community with those who struggle with life experiences different than my own, and not approach them as someone to be uncertain around, uncomfortable with, but as sisters, brothers, siblings, and friends? Why, O Lord, the uncertainty and hesitation on my part?

And why the discrepancy between the \$100 lunch and the \$5 for breakfast?

Sometimes, when we gather as the faith community of St. Mary's, it is like the parables of Jesus are being lived around in full color all around us, in the faces and lives of those around us. Inviting us in...

So I pray:

Teach me, O Jesus, what it means to more fully love my neighbor as myself, without separation or distance.

And thank you for being among us still,
in sometimes obvious
and sometimes unexpected ways.

Amen.

Scripture Readings Appointed for the Day:

The Collect

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favour is better than silver or gold.

The rich and the poor have this in common:
the Lord is the maker of them all.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;

for the Lord pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Psalm 125

1 Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, *
which cannot be moved, but stands fast for ever.

2 The hills stand about Jerusalem; *
so does the Lord stand round about his people,
from this time forth for evermore.

3 The scepter of the wicked shall not hold sway over the land allotted to the just, *
so that the just shall not put their hands to evil.

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4 Show your goodness, O Lord, to those who are good *
and to those who are true of heart.

5 As for those who turn aside to crooked ways,
the Lord will lead them away with the evildoers; *
but peace be upon Israel.

or

Old Testament - Isaiah 35:4-7a

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,

with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

Psalm 146

1 Hallelujah!
Praise the Lord, O my soul! *
I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

2 Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, *
for there is no help in them.

3 When they breathe their last, they return to earth, *
and in that day their thoughts perish.

4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! *
whose hope is in the Lord their God;

5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; *
who keeps his promise for ever;

6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, *
and food to those who hunger.

7 The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; *
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

8 The Lord loves the righteous;
the Lord cares for the stranger; *
he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

9 The Lord shall reign for ever, *
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.
Hallelujah!

The Epistle - James 2:1-10, 14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

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. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

The Gospel - Mark 7:24-37

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

U2 – Crumbs from your table

From the brightest star
Comes the blackest hole
You had so much to offer
Why did you offer your soul?
I was there for you baby
When you needed my help
Would you deny for others
What you demand for yourself?

Cool down mama, cool off
Cool down mama, cool off

You speak of signs and wonders
I need something other
I would believe if I was able
But I'm waiting on the crumbs from your table

You were pretty as a picture
It was all there to see
Then your face caught up with your psychology
With a mouth full of teeth
You ate all your friends
And you broke every heart thinking every heart mends

You speak of signs and wonders
But I need something other
I would believe if I was able
But I'm waiting on the crumbs from your table

Where you live should not decide
Whether you live or whether you die
Three to a bed
Sister Ann, she said
Dignity passes by

And you speak of signs and wonders
But I need something other
I would believe if I was able
I'm waiting on the crumbs from your table