

September 8/9, 2018
Rev. Scott Shreve

“Growing as Children of God”

St. Paul UMC, Omaha
Mark 7:24-30

On Wednesday evenings Rev. Wheeler and I are alternating leadership in a study group open to all that meets in the chapel. We are using the book entitled *Is It Time?* with the subtitle *Helping Laity and Clergy Discuss Homosexuality One Question at a Time*. Rev. Brabec is hosting the same class on Thursday mornings at 10 a.m. There are 12 chapters in the book and we cover one chapter per week. Each chapter is short enough so it allows us to read the full chapter together. Since the book is written to foster dialogue there are breaks at various points in each chapter that simply say *Pause for Reflection* and then we stop and share. Chapter 1 which we read this past Wednesday was entitled *Is it time to stop using the word homosexuality without defining it? Maybe yes. Maybe no. What do you think?* It was a very informative chapter and we had good sharing of our perspectives. All are welcome and you can attend as many or few of the gatherings between now and Thanksgiving as your schedule allows.

Near the end of the class one member suggested watching the Netflix presentation by Hannah Gadsby entitled *Nanette*. She is a comedian and she shares her perspective on growing up as a lesbian throughout her stand up routine. Marjorie and I watched it Wednesday night when we got home after the class. It is for a mature audience. She is funny. Yet it has some very powerful sharing as well. I came into the office Thursday, my day to write this message, inspired by Hannah Gadsby's style which is “first-person sharing” so I decided to format my sermon in that style. Let us pray...

I don't know about you but more often than I would like to admit I am disappointed in the way I handle this or that interaction during the day. Out of the blue I do or say something that is less than optimal.

“I could have been more patient there.”

“Why did I use those words that were hurtful when I could have used words that were at least neutral if not nurturing.”

“Why, why, why, why?”

I am left asking myself why? Oftentimes a reason for my “why's” comes to mind and then I develop a game plan on how to be the mature and caring person that I have in my mind's eye next time. Now I don't want to cause any alarm that you might have for the tenuous state of my mental health because the vast majority of the time I am delighted with myself, my state in life, the blessing of friends and family and how I interact with the world around me. But the disappointments are present.

I believe one of the larger attractions for me for becoming a follower of Jesus, that is, a disciple of Christ is that I saw that I am a better person when I live according to the teachings of Jesus. Yes, I want to be that person that can forgive seven times seventy times. Yes, I want to be that person who is a Good Samaritan. Yes, I want to cloth myself with compassion, kindness, humility, and patience. Yes, I want to have faith, hope and love in my heart, with the greatest of those being love in my daily actions. I saw as a teenage and then as I moved into adulthood that the more I read the New Testament, attended worship, joined adult studies and engaged in mission work that I am closer to being the person that I have in my mind's eye. Even when I fall short I can use some of that forgiveness stuff on myself and start moving forward again.

I think this whole dynamic of being the best I might also is the reason why I delight in Bible passages like we had last weekend. Remember it? It is when the Pharisees and scribes screw up again. I hate to admit it but I sure feel better when I see others, especially those 2,000 years removed, screw up big time. I can take solace in the fact that at least I don't screw up that bad (at least I don't think I do). It is like being on the golf course and I am shooting bogey but at least I am not landing out of bounds and in the lake all the time like the other guy in the foursome. Remember the Pharisees and scribes last week when they venture up north to Galilee to check in on Jesus? Jesus and his disciples are casting out demons, multitudes are being fed, Jesus walks on the water, the sick are healed and what do the Pharisees and scribes focus on; hand washing!

Instead of celebrating how God is powerfully working through Jesus and his disciples the Pharisees and scribes seemingly have an agenda to find fault with Jesus and his activities. I might miss the point every now and then but I am not as bad as those Pharisees and scribes.

Let me say this tongue-in-cheek. The Bible is the best of both worlds as Jesus provides us with the game plan to be the best we can be and then the actions of his adversaries set the bar so low that we can always feel as if we are doing a good job, if not great.

Then we get to our lesson for this weekend. After trying to get away to the wilderness for some down time in Galilee and be greeted by thousands of followers Jesus goes north, out of Israel, to the region of Tyre to secure some alone time. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Jesus is exhausted and he just needs to crash. Not pray or meditate but just sleep. 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.

This woman is one bold, assertive, risk taking person. She is a Gentile which means she is not a Jew like Jesus. She is Syrophenician which means she is not an Israelite like Jesus. She is a woman and women did not just come up and talk to a man in public without permission in Biblical days. Beyond being bold, assertive and risk taking she has a faith that enables her to envision that a person of a religion that is not her own religion can do good and even miraculous things. I think there is a lot that we, in the 21st century, can learn from this Syrophenician woman. She begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Jesus responds by saying, "Let the children be feed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Jesus said what?

That was harsh, judgmental at best and an ethnic slur at worse.

"Jesus, I expect that kind of attitude from the Pharisees and scribes for they are a hard hearted bunch. I expect me to screw up and say something hurtful to another person every now and then. But Jesus, I don't ever expect that out of you!"

Even Jesus, exhausted and desperate for rest, has his bad moments. I am glad that Mark leaves this story in his gospel. He doesn't give a white washed version of Jesus. It lets us know that even Jesus had his bad moments. That's kind of reassuring. It doesn't give us permission to mess up but if Jesus can have a bad moment then it is okay if I have a bad moment or two. It also gives some definition to the "fully human" side of our affirmation of faith that says Jesus is "fully human and fully divine."

But please look at the faith and strength of this Syrophenician woman. She takes the insult from Jesus and turns it on its head. A tactic Jesus often uses with his adversaries all the time. She answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." After absorbing the insult from Jesus she keeps the dialogue respectful as she addresses Jesus as "Sir." Then she states that even though she and her daughter might be viewed as "dogs" since they are foreigners who adhere to another religion that "dogs" at least get crumbs from the feast of the "truly faithful." Jesus is humbled and he sees the error of his way. He composes himself, acknowledges the woman's point is well stated and grants the request as the daughter is healed.

In closing I would like to thank the Syrophenician woman and Jesus for what each of them teach us in the gospel of Mark? May I include you in my thanks?

We thank you Syrophenician woman for being strong for the sake of your daughter. We thank you for showing us how to maintain faith in another person even when that other person has a bad moment. We thank you for demonstrating conviction and perseverance. We thank you Syrophenician woman and we are sorry we cannot personalize our gratitude since we do not know your name. Yet we are happy your story is in gospel record.

Jesus, we thank you as well. We thank you for your teachings, your modeling of good behavior 99% of the time, and your sacrificial love when it was called for in your life. Jesus we thank that in this passage of scripture that you remind us that we must get our proper rest or there is no way we will be humane with one another much less at our best. Jesus, we thank you because you remind us that we can all have bad moments but we can recover from them as well. Thank you for humbling yourself when the Syrophoenician woman cleverly turned your words on you. Jesus, thank you for healing her daughter and thank you for your healing touch in our lives.