

# CHANGE OF HEART

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September 9, 2018

Pentecost 16

[James 2:14-17](#)

[Mark 7:24-37](#)

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(prayer)

For each of the first three Sundays of September this year, I have decided to include a reading from the new testament letter of James (as suggested in the Revised Common Lectionary): last week was from chapter one; this week, a few verses from chapter two; next week, you'll hear from chapter three.

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As I noted last week, protestant reformation leader, Martin Luther was uneasy with James being part of the NT. He also wasn't a fan of the books of Esther, Hebrews, Jude and Revelation.

Luther famously called James an "epistle of straw" because with its emphasis on a connection between faith and works; Luther argued the letter goes against the emerging protestant [doctrines](#) of *sola fide* (by faith alone) and *sola gratia* (by grace alone).

As I mentioned last week, Luther's concern was that people would read James and conclude that one needs to *earn* God's grace through good works --- that faith and grace only can come **after** works. This was the opposite of Luther's theology of "faith and grace alone".

Yeah, so he didn't like James.

But... again, I stated last week that **my** reading of James presents "works" was a living out of faith, not a prerequisite for grace.

That is most obviously seen in a quote from today's reading from chapter two: *faith by itself (if it has no works) is dead*. In another verse later in the letter, James says that *faith without works is barren*.

Both of these metaphors imply that... unless a person's actions reflect what they believe, the very life of faith is extinguished.

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The book of James encourages the christian to have a practical, living faith.

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We are (each of us) a constant work-in-progress.

As we live on this globe, we gain new experiences and they change the make up of of we are. Life is about change.

Each new moment brings new *life and opportunity* into our being.

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And so, it makes sense (to me) that as our knowledge and experience is broadened, *how* we respond to what we believe can - *and should* - evolve.

I think that we are in good company in this assertion.

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In the verses that immediately precede what was read earlier from Mark (chapter seven), we can read of a time when Jesus got into an argument with some Jerusalem Pharisees about whether foods needed to be washed before they were eaten or prepared for cooking and whether their faith required that people wash their hands before eating.

*It is important to remember that Jesus was also a pharassaic jew. What was going in this case*

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was more a debate on the differing practices between the rural and urban areas, among otherwise like-minded people.

The city pharisees did not point to a specific law in the torah to make their case but referred to - what they called - the *tradition of the elders* that hands (and food and pots and pans) had to be washed before eating. Clearly, beyond the city walls, this “tradition” was not as rigidly practiced.

Now, a good *health* based case can be made about having clean eating and food prep environments, but the pharisees debating Jesus were arguing that this was more of a religious-spiritual matter.

Jesus chose to respond with a very practical reality. *What goes into us does not [spiritually] defile us; it is what we say and do that highlights what is sacred.* Jesus seems to be saying that blindly following a tradition (for tradition’s sake) can distract us from the *living faith* of today.

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This is scripturally consistent with the prophet Micah’s old sermon: *Shall I come before the Lord with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams? ... What does the Lord require of you: but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6:6-8).

And, Jesus’ words seems to have been picked up as the theme that the letter of James later espoused: *faith without action is devoid of life.*

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“This” is the context that Jesus and the disciples took with them to the Lebanon coast (known in the greco-roman world as Phoenicia).

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In Mark, this appears to be the first time Jesus ventured beyond the region of the Sea of Galilee: to say that another way - this is the first time that Jesus went to an area where most of the local inhabitants did not share his faith and traditions.

*Why* they travelled to Tyre is unclear.

As we look at today’s story, they were **not** to try and convert Gentiles. First of all, Judaism has never been an aggressive proselytizing religion. The old poets were fond of saying that “the nations would come to them” not that they would go out to the nations.

I mean, if Jesus’ goal was *evangelical*, he wouldn’t have tried to remain anonymous --- as the text says, “[Jesus] did not want anyone to know he was there.”

My experience with modern evangelicals is that they want as many people as possible to know *what they are saying and doing* to advance their ministries.

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Even though this was Jesus first time away from his *home* territory, his reputation as a skilled healer made the trip as well. “[Jesus] did not want anyone to know he was there; **yet** he could not escape notice.”

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Even so, it is fair to say that Jesus was likely caught off guard when the Gentile woman burst into the house asking for this Jewish healer to help her child.

And here is another reason why we know that Jesus was not in Tyre to reach out *evangelically* to the syrophonicians: Jesus expressed no interest in the non-jewish woman’s request. He did not want to share his gospel with her.

Mark 7:27 quotes Jesus using these condescending and insulting words: *Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.*

When Matthew re-tells this story, that gospel adds that Jesus also (reportedly) said, *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*

The message is clear: Jesus sees no duty to share the blessings of his ministry with anyone outside of “his people”. Jesus seems to have arrived in Tyre believing that every minute he focuses on a “gentile’s needs” is an *opportunity-lost* for the narrow focus on the Israelite people. To change his focus (Jesus argues) would be as irresponsible as parents letting their child starve while the dogs feast.

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And then the woman preached to the rabbi.

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She embraced the insult and expanded Jesus’ metaphor: *but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.*

In other words: she challenged the assertion that Jesus’ healing ministry needed to be a zero sum game - that there was only so much of Jesus to go around (in order for one to gain, another had to lose). Because of the *zero sum*, the ministry should not be wasted beyond Jesus’ tribe.

The (unnamed) asserted that even an unnoticeable crumb of Jesus’ talent was sufficient to change her life: a glimpse of grace would do.

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Hmmmmmm??

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[https://youtu.be/VEA\\_gt9rc9c](https://youtu.be/VEA_gt9rc9c)



And what happened, then?  
Well, in Whoville they say -  
that the Grinch's small heart  
grew three sizes that day!

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[Well said], you may go.  
The demon has left your daughter.

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And what happened, then  
well, in Tyre, Mark penned,  
that when she got home,  
her girl was healthy again.

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As we heard (from Mark earlier), after this heart-changing encounter, Jesus and his disciples made their way back *home* (to familiar territory of the Sea of Galilee).

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But, the text tells us that they took the **long** way home -- *by way of Sidon... in the region of the Decapolis*.

Tyre was about 100km (as the dove flies) northwest of Capernaum. To go through Sidon and the Decapolis, Jesus went north and then east, then South, coming at the Sea from the other side.

\*\*This "route" tells us that Jesus *intentionally* spent more time in Gentiles areas, than his end destination required.\*\*

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As we heard in The second half of today's Mark reading, along that *out-of-the-way* way, a deaf man (a Gentile, presumably) had his hearing restored.

No talk of dogs this time.

Notice that Jesus didn't heal the man to gain notoriety: the healing took place privately and Jesus begged everyone to not talk about it.

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In both Mark and Matthew, after this *change of heart* trip to Tyre, there is no more mention of Jesus' ministry being limited to the House of Israel.

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From that moment on...

The heart of the gospel grows!

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My understanding of Mark, chapter seven, provides a sense for how I view modern examples of how people relate to and treat each other.



- [United Church Crest](#): "It Omnes Unum Sint" = *That All May Be One*
  - Refugee benefits v Pensioner benefits
  - Pat Tillman v Colin Kapernick
  - Trump-like Rhetoric
  - Globalism v Tribalism
- [United Church Crest](#):  
"Akwe Nia'Tetewá:neren"  
[aw gway -- nyah day day waw -- nay renh]  
= *All My Relations*

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I can admit that I have not always been this inclusive throughout my life.

As I have matured, as I have met more people, and expanded my experiences and understandings, I have been challenged by the evolution I see in Jesus' example.

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There might be some people who see unwaveringly *standing one's ground* as the epitome of strength. And there are times when holding up against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune takes powerful resolve.

But - at its worse - stubbornness insists that any change is a sign of weakness.

It is so hard to witness someone who continue to support an indefensible position or attitude because they are unwilling to appear weak.

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I am so grateful to Jesus (and the gospel writers who preserved the story) for modelling that changes of heart are possible.

From time to time, we become aware of a new path that we had not noticed before... or even a path that we did notice, but refused to take.

There is great honour and strength in being able to admit that an old way no longer makes sense.

**If Jesus can do it, so can we!**

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The gospel of Jesus is all about a love that reaches wide.

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As Christian disciples, we are called to follow Jesus... even if it is down a new road!

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Let us pray:

Kind God, open our hearts to *feel* and *live out* a deep and honest love for all of the people of your creation, especially those different from us. Amen.

#598VU "Walls That Divide"

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