

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES - 2021

September 5, 2021

Pentecost 15

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

Ps 125

James 2:1-17

Mark 7:24-37

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My name is Kathy Martin and I serve as the assistant to the bishop in the BC Synod with particular focus in the area of mission renewal and congregational support. I live, work, and worship on the unceded ancestral land of the Semiahmoo and Coast Salish peoples.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from the One who is, who was and who is to come. Amen.

This summer the effects of climate change have been ever so visible across our country... droughts, floods and fires just to name a few. I live in the Greater Vancouver area, the Lower Mainland of BC, and we have had high temperatures, a devastating heat dome and heat waves several times over this summer. Sadly, as communities we've discovered how ill-prepared we are for these extreme weather events. Even as I write there are scores wildfires running up and down the mountains of BC's interior regions forcing the closure of several major highways, displacing people and creatures great and small; devastating natural areas as well as those formed and shaped and built by our hands.

Fires are inevitable, of course, and necessary. In time, they make way for new growth: they redistribute nutrients moldering on the forest floor, change the profile of the tree canopy so the sunlight can make its way through. The sharp heat cracks open the cones, freeing the seeds and making way for a new generation of trees. But first, when these fires appear, random, wild and out of control, all we see is the devastation and the aftermath of this beloved landscape that is now changed forever.

After some time (and often much sooner than we expect) tiny shoots of new life emerge, here and there, little clumps of green. From a distance the charred trees remain the most visible feature of the landscape. We have to get closer, look more carefully, if we want to see what is emerging out of the ashes.

In our gospel reading, an exchange between Jesus and the mother of a young child, is like a wild fire. In just a few moments it changes the landscape of Jesus' ministry. The sharpness of the woman's response cracks open assumptions of the past, releasing seeds that will begin to flourish and make way for a new generation of ministry.

Jesus is in the region of Tyre, on the Syrophenician coast just a little beyond the borders of Israel. His schedule has been hectic with very little Sabbath time to catch up with himself, to recharge, reflect and pray. He has been trying to slip away for a bit of rest but everywhere he goes the crowds follow or figure out where he is going and then even arrive there ahead of him. Perhaps that is why he goes into the territory of the Gentiles, to get a little respite from it all, some distance from the people of Israel.

A multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-faith port city like Tyre was just the kind of place his people would avoid like a plague. It felt like there was something on every corner that would make them unclean; the wrong kind of people, the wrong kind of cloth or animals, the wrong kind of practices.

Jesus may have come to this region hoping for a little anonymity but his reputation has gone ahead of him even here. He tucks himself up in a house, makes it clear he doesn't want anyone to know he is there, but he still can't escape notice. Word of his presence spreads like wildfire and a mother arrives, prostrates herself at his feet and begs him to cast the demon out of her little daughter. There is no way to know what this really means. In Jesus' time all kinds of illnesses were assumed to be caused by evil spirits.

We are told the woman is of Syrophenician heritage. This means she is Gentile, not Jewish like Jesus and his followers. Her background, her culture, her religion are different than his. To us, all these generations later, we think this is something that wouldn't have mattered to Jesus, wouldn't have been something that deterred him from helping someone so desperate for his aid. Her origins or faith background just shouldn't be the deciding factor...but in that moment for Jesus it was. In Tyre, surrounded by people he'd been taught to avoid, dismiss, and see as unclean...in his weariness, in his yearning for just a few hours of anonymity he utters these horrible words to an anguished mother begging for help for her little girl. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What? What did he say?

His response is outrageous...at least to us. Yet to the people of his day, to the Gentiles hearing this story, Jesus' comment wouldn't even have raised an eyebrow. To them it was a completely appropriate and reasonable response...no matter how we might struggle with it now.

I read somewhere that the most dangerous prejudices are the ones that are unacknowledged, the ones we do not realize we have. If we can't see them, we can't change them. We are all shaped by the mindset of the world we grow up in whether we are aware of it or not, whether we like it or not. This is true even for Jesus.

Yet this woman, this mother, doesn't back down. In her desperation she sees and challenges his cultural and religious bias. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She contends that there is a deeper truth about God that his past is obscuring and she challenges his refusal to help.

Her words burn and in the sharpness of her response Jesus realizes that his call goes far beyond the people he calls his own. In that moment a new generation of ministry begins to take root, one that will flourish over the centuries and extend to the ends of the earth. A ministry that will welcome all people, include all people, and open the door to all people to enter into the love and grace of God.

I wonder who you might encounter if you risked venturing into places in your neighbourhood or community that you normally would avoid? I wonder if you might find someone who would interrupt your way thinking like the woman did when she encountered Jesus? I wonder who might cause us as a church to re-evaluate our living, our prejudices, our assumptions about the way the world works or ought to. Maybe we would discover that there are things that need to change, in our life together as ELCIC, as Synods, as this Lutheran expression of the church in Canada, the way they did for Jesus when he started really listening to this Syrophonecian woman.

Over and over, God's call to us includes learning, having our assumptions challenged and our ears opened to God's grace. It means letting go of cultural prejudices, embracing insiders and outsiders, and giving up the idea that there is not enough grace to go around. For these tiny morsels, the smallest crumbs, from the table are precious gifts and a feast beyond our wildest imagining. Amen.