



Pentecost 16 September 9, 2018: St. Mary's South Hill

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 Syrophoenician 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."

There's a saying: "Life doesn't come with a manual; it comes with a mother."

There are, of course, problems with this saying: Mothers are not the only important influencers in a child's life—in many, many families Dads are as important and in some families more important influencers than mothers are. And then there's the fact that for some people, their mothers were not always the manual on life that we would wish.

But today as we hear this particular reading from Mark's Gospel and as we recognize a group of women here at St. Mary's embracing the ideals and practices of the Mothers Union, today, let's use this saying to see into something important for us all—the way that women, particularly mothers, can through their commitment, their persistence and their willingness to risk themselves inspire us to do the same when it comes to those most in need—the most vulnerable in society.

“Life doesn’t come with a manual; it comes with a mother.”

Let’s first look at the mother in our Gospel for today.

She is the mother of a sick child, and she is a Gentile, that is, a woman with whom a Jewish man would not normally have had any contact. In Mark’s story she seeks Jesus out during a time when he has withdrawn to a Gentile territory for rest.

An important thing to note is that in this story Jesus is the person with most of the power. He’s in a private home in which men ruled the roost, and as a Jewish man he, himself, would have had certain assumptions about his own power. He’s a person whose reputation for healing has spread even to this Gentile outpost. He’s also Mark’s Jesus, the powerful Holy One through whom God’s new order of dignity and justice has come to the Jews.

But what of the mother, the woman who seeks Jesus out? She is a Gentile, a pagan, having entered a household where she has not been invited. She is a woman in a world where women do not have power. She is also the mother of a child with an unexplainable illness in a culture in which illness often led to shame and isolation.

As the story goes, the woman comes into the house and bows at Jesus’ feet begging that he heal her daughter of an unclean spirit—the bowing, of course, a reminder that he is the one with the power and she is the one without. And this is where the crucial dialogue begins that shows us who this mother really is. For Jesus declines to heal her daughter, saying “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and feed it to the dogs,” What Jesus is speaking of here, of course, is that his mission, his energy, his efforts were to be directed to the Jewish people, not to the Gentiles. And so he is saying that the dogs, that is, the Gentiles, will get the bread, that is, the message of the reconciling and liberating love of God, only after the children of Israel receive it.

But no matter where Jesus is coming from on this, this woman, this mother, does not miss a beat. She does not argue with the word “dogs” for the Gentiles, for herself or for her daughter, but instead turns it to her advantage in an illustration drawn from mealtime around the table in her own home. At meals in her home even the lowliest members of the household receive nourishment. “Yes, Lord,” she counters, “but even the dogs under the table feed on the children’s crumbs.”

Her point is this: in my household the children and the dogs both eat. And they eat simultaneously.

And so what we see in this story is a mother who neither appeals to Jesus based on any sense of entitlement nor withers under Jesus’ initial rebuff. Rather her strong and clear appeal is to boast of God’s mercy, the very mercy she knows from her own experience. Yes, the dogs around her own table do not have the same status as her beloved daughter, and the food that she prepares is not prepared for them. However, they are fed just as her daughter is. In other words, mercy, that is a kind of open-handed generosity, is a kind of daily reality in her household. And if she operates this way, shouldn’t, wouldn’t God operate this way too?

And, of course, what we see next is that, yes, God will operate this way. For the woman’s assertion about God’s boundless mercy enables Jesus, himself, to live into it in a new way. The one sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel can and does extend the reconciling, liberating power of God to the daughter of a Gentile woman. God’s mercy is unbounded. And in an exquisite turnabout, Jesus, the Lord of Life learns this from the Gentile mother of a sick little girl.

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And so to return to this saying, in this story, both for the Gentile woman’s child, who would likely have been marginalized all her life with her illness and for Jesus, whose sense of his mission and the

mercy of God was actually too narrow, life, a new and expanded life, didn't come through a manual, that is, a kind of playbook of how things should be; it came through a living, breathing, loving, persistent mother.

And, of course, this is what the Mother's Union is all about, isn't it? Women who together act out of the boundless mercy of God. Women who act with a dogged commitment to those in the world who cry out for care—orphans, refugees, families of all kinds—across the globe or in their own communities. Women who persist out of the belief that God persists even in the most desperate situations to inspire compassion in the midst of inhumane conditions, to bring life out of death.

And, of course, doesn't this all point at what we as Christians are all supposed to be about? Living in a way that claims the boundless mercy of God in all that we do? Living, in fact, in a way that expands the understanding of just how boundless God's mercy really is? Living in solidarity with and advocating for those whose lives the societal playbook, the societal manual, would simply cast aside?

Today, you and I, got to see a group of women who will be joining with others in the Mother's Union as one way of enacting the boundless mercy of God. As we think about what they will be doing, consider the way that your own life can be the book in which others read and come to know just how boundless God's mercy really is in this world. Consider your life—the ways you have been the recipient, the beneficiary of that boundless mercy and the particular ways you can enact that mercy in the world. For the world does not operate and is not really influenced by some manual, by some playbook that governs and controls what will be. It is influenced, it is inspired by you, by me, by us, by our lives, by our decisions about how generous, how merciful, how bold, how persistent, how dogged we will be.

The Most Reverend Melissa Skelton