

Isaiah 35:4-7a ~ Mark 7:24-37
Be Opened
 September 9, 2018, Rally Day Sunday
 Rev. Dr Laurie Brubaker Davis

Intro to text

Anybody else feeling an anniversary vibe this morning? A year ago this Sunday, was the day I came to preach and candidate to become your pastor. A year ago you all voted me in to begin my pastorate here on November 1. This beautiful, crisp early fall air brings it back. And a great memory it is! But do I remember what I preached on that day? Not really. So I looked it up, the sermon was titled, "Is God's Mercy Too Wide?" That made me smile, because here we are a year later, with a different story from a different gospel, but the same message: it's all over those Bibles we gave the third graders and confirmands. If we open our Bibles and let God's Word in, we really can't get away from it: God's boundary-breaking, death-defying, Reign of Love is open and available to ALL. Contrary to public opinion, there is no "us" and "them" in God's eyes. I'm grateful to be here at FPC, where we believe this message to be true. And I'm ready to keep working together to learn inch-by-inch how to live it, breathe it, walk it, and talk it.

Today's boundary-breaking story is particularly unsettling. We hear Jesus call a woman a dog and refuse to heal her sick daughter. Jesus said, that? Yikes. This story is not one of the passages on the bookmarks we just passed out. But maybe it should be, because it's one of those rare stories where we see and hear Jesus acting a little more like us: Jesus, being tired of people; Jesus, avoiding crowds, just wanting to chill, and put on his "soft clothes," as we say in our family. If he had a smart phone, he'd be asking his host for the WIFI password at this house where he was a guest so he could just pop in his ear buds and tune out the world for a moment. But instead even way up there in Tyre, far away from Galilee, a Gentile woman finds him, bursts in, throws herself at his feet, and begs that he heal her daughter. Jesus refuses. Sorry, not you, not now. Jews only. You are not a Jew. He closed the door. But then, against all odds, she opens it back up with a response that *changed the story*. Let us listen to Mark 7:24-37 and let us be opened to its truth for us and for our church.

Sermon

When your church is burned down, what do you have left? What is still there? And what do you do next? A week ago at this time, Wesley United Methodist Church was standing tall as ever, its members held Sunday morning worship as they had for 137 years. Pastor Lourdes left the building about 1:00 pm. But then about two o'clock a fire was spotted and called in. We learned later it had started in the kitchen and spread quickly, destroying the whole structure despite the courageous efforts of firefighters from Marshfield, Hewitt and Richfield. Gone. This devastating tragedy shakes us to the core. It reminds us of how temporal our hold on the things of this life really is. It opens up the bigger questions we'd rather not think about, like, "How can God bring resurrection hope to this total loss?"

Overwhelmed by the magnitude of this loss, my colleague and friend Pastor Lourdes found herself called (if not yanked) into a brand new and challenging dimension of pastoring: Leading her congregation through a time such as this. She decided on Wednesday to change her usual home communion delivery schedule to attend our weekly ecumenical Bible Study, sensing that was where she needed to be that day. As she entered our customary meeting room at Faith Lutheran, much to her surprise she saw a table filled with all of our usual 10 participants seated around it (we don't usually all come), and also two pastors from two of the larger non-denominational churches in town. All of us were eager to hear her story, offer tangible support as she outlined specific immediate needs, and then we prayed. We invited her to kneel on the floor so we could all pray over her and do a laying on of hands, in the biblical tradition. Janet Wolfe, Dan Crump, and I were among those offering this prayer. It was a powerful, spirit-filled moment.

This room where we have met week after week and for many, year after year, doing our regular weekly Bible Study of the texts we are all preparing to preach, this morning, opened out into something more. All of a sudden we were standing together on holy ground where Jesus who suffers with and suffers for us, was working in and through us. Differences in doctrine became unimportant to the work of the Holy Spirit. We got to experience the boundary-breaking death-defying power of God's love, God's healing, Deep loss, or the threat of loss, seems to open us like nothing else can.

Afterwards, Lourdes shared with me that walking into that room of pastors praying together while touching hand to shoulder, was the start of an answer to her heart prayer earlier that morning. She had prayed that somehow this fire would help to bring the churches of Marshfield together, unifying them through the love of Christ Jesus for everyone. In this case, somehow it was that terrible fire that opened us in a new way. Somehow that fire had broken down the barriers that usually divide our Marshfield churches into "us" and "them."

Our Gospel story was also ignited and fueled by an extreme situation of impending loss. It was a "Hail Mary" pass by a mom trying desperately to save her child plagued by a debilitating mental illness. Her toughness and tenacity overcame all the perfectly good reasons why she should never have bothered the Rabbi. And toughness and tenacity (Matthew called it "faith" in his version of the story) overcame the perfectly good reasons why the Rabbi Jesus responded with a provocatively worded "no."

Whether her quick-witted, penetrating response actually changed Jesus mind, (which I believe is the most straight forward reading of this story) or whether Jesus' initial "no" was a rabbinical teaching technique to push her to make her claim, for all the biblical scholarly ink that has been spilled trying to figure this out, the main point is clear: in God's realm, in God's eyes, there is no "us" and "them", there is ranking of better and worse. And yet, this was clearly a hot button issue for the early church, at the time that the Gospel of Mark was written. For them the difficult

questions was: “Can we let Gentiles in?” Good thing for us, they went with “yes” on that one. But this larger question of “who’s in and who’s out,” has been a hot-button issue from Genesis to Revelation. And we are well aware, it continues to roil us today, here and now.

The particular angle on this vexing issue of “who’s in and who’s out” that our Syrophonecian woman’s story teaches is this: It is the underdog who can speak this truth to us, like no one else can. Those who are under the table have a perspective that we need to hear. Their perspective will open our hearts and teach us to see beyond our own lens. They all have a place at the Lord’s Table: As much as anyone does. This is humbling, this is decentering. This is what it means to be a Christian.

Let’s be honest: most of us, who happen to be born white and U.S. citizens, are blind to what it is like to be “under the table.” I know I am. As author Debby Irving in the discovery of white privilege in her own life, chronicled in her book, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* wrote,

“My ancestors did sacrifice and work hard, and I am a diligent worker. But no longer could I deny that my life had been borne on the wings of whiteness. I’ve had an unfair advantage since before I was born. Just as time had compounded disadvantages for people living on the downside of systemic racism, it has compounded the advantages I and other white people enjoy. My life is built on family members able to get citizenship status without a fight, land grants for free, GI Bill benefits, low-rate loans, good education, and solid health care.

Each generation has set up the starting point for the next, perpetuating the illusion that white people are more successful, not beneficiaries of an inequitable system. As Jim Hightower said about President George W. Bush, and one could say just as easily about me, (and I would add, about me too) “[He] was born on third base [but] he thought he had hit a triple.” Unacceptable is the counterpart to that: the kid who hits and hits and still gets nowhere, ultimately coming to believe in his own inferiority.”ⁱ

That’s another way of describing the kid who is born under the table. And also the grown-ups under the table, too. God is calling us to listen to them, to hear their truth and to speak ours with them.

The Syrophonecian woman in our story had “toughness and tenacity.” She reminds me of Geronimo Allison, the Green Bay Packers wide receiver who came in as an undrafted rookie from Tampa, Florida and has climbed to the #3 in depth chart in less than three years. Mike Spofford describes him as never showing signs of being intimidated despite his humble football path. “G-Mo” tells it like this, “I came from a rough urban community. Some people call it the projects, some people call it the hood. Everybody classifies it differently, but it is a rough community...That kind of shaped me but didn’t make me.” You might say he came from “under the table” and now has a place of honor at the table. Aaron Rodgers said, “Allison has put in the work, now he just needs to get open. The ball goes to the open guy. If he’s open, he’ll get the ball.”ⁱⁱ

I'm pretty sure Aaron Rodgers was really just talking about football, but I think his words about whether or not he will throw the ball to G-mo Allison, can be applied to the healing work of God's reign where there is no "us" and them." Yes, I'm comparing FPC to the Green Bay Packers. Hey, it's opening game tonight, right? Step one; be open to my metaphorical leap. Are you still with me? OK, here we go: If we are open, if we place our hearts, our bodies, our minds in a way that is ready to see and to receive the call of Jesus, especially from the voices of those who are under the table, the world can start to heal. If we are open, we will get the ball. Let's run with it!

ⁱ Debby Irving, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, (Elephant Press, Cambridge: MA, 2014) pp. 59-60.

ⁱⁱ Mike Spofford, Packers.com Senior Writer

<https://www.packers.com/news/expectations-may-have-changed-but-geronimo-allison-hasn-t>