



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Open Up!
Isaiah 35:4-7a; Mark 7:24-37

It occurred to me this past week that when many of you decided to follow Jesus you really meant it. You took that commitment seriously. And you must have read the story we just heard because when Jesus decided that it was time for a vacation, he headed for the beach. That's right! Tyre was a coastal community on the Mediterranean Sea and that is where Jesus went when he wanted to get away for some peace and quiet. So now if anyone (like your pastor) gives you a hard time about being gone so much of the summer, you have a proof text. You have been following Jesus . . . right to the sand and the sea!

But wouldn't you know it, just as Jesus settled into a comfortable chair on the deck, took a long sip of a cool drink, adjusted his sun glasses and started looking out over the waves rolling in on the beach, there was a knock at the door. Hoping it was the pizza delivery guy, he got up, went through the house, and opened the door.

If you have ever had a long-lost cousin and his family drop in on your vacation, you know how Jesus felt when he opened the door. It wasn't John the Baptist, but it was a woman clearly distressed and obviously wanting something from him.

I imagine Jesus started to say something like "I gave at the office" or "I'm not interested today" as he quickly began closing the door—which is what I would do. But the woman was faster and stuck her sandaled foot in the door to keep it open.

Doing her best to control her shaking voice, but with a fierce determination, this desperate mother explained that her daughter was ill—worse than just ill—she had a demon—and she wanted Jesus to get rid of it.

Jesus sighed. "This is why I came here," he thought, "to get a break from all of these demands for help. Can't I have a couple of days to myself?" He looked down at the woman who had bowed herself at his feet as if he were a king. She was not Jewish. She was a Gentile, a Syrophoenician, one of the

Gentiles whose families had lived along the coast for centuries. He liked Gentiles and had made a few Gentile friends along the way, but his primary mission was to the children of Israel. He needed to focus his attention and energy on getting the Jews on board with what God was doing through him. He would get to the Gentiles later. Jesus told this woman as much, but he wasn't very diplomatic about it. Maybe because he was so tired or he had already had too much sun or he was just weary of always being asked to do something for someone else. Whatever the reason, Jesus said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch! Didn't Mary teach him better than that?!

I bet that woman jumped to her feet and started coming through the door as she answered him with a menacing snarl and said between clenched teeth, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

I know that this conversation sounds like code to us. Jesus was talking about the revelation of God's kingdom on earth and how it was supposed to be revealed first to the children of Israel and then to the Gentiles. The fulfillment of all those prophecies was "the children's food" and he was trying to spoon feed it to them, though it did not always go well. I doubt the woman had any problem with the fact that the Jews were the people God had chosen to receive his good news first so that they could share it with the rest of the world. Quite obviously she was offended when Jesus referred to her and her daughter and the rest of the Gentiles as "dogs." Clearly that was not the best term to describe them. As my friend Preston Smith says, we each grow up with biases and filters through which we look at the world and the people in the world. Even though we may not agree with those biases anymore, from time to time, they slip out before we know it and expose the attitudes that have helped shape who we are. Historically and culturally, Jews were not fans of Gentiles. Many differences of opinion and practice separated them and a Jew would always give preference to another Jew before a Gentile. No doubt, growing up in the hill country village of Nazareth, Jesus often heard Gentiles referred to as dogs. Apart from this story, it is clear that he included Gentiles in God's redemptive work. In fact, reaching out to the Gentiles sometimes got him in trouble with other Jews. In this instance, however, whether exhausted and not thinking clearly or not, Jesus had a cultural reflex to this woman's request, and it set her off!

There are many times when someone says or does something that offends and shocks us so that we do not know how to react at the moment. Sometimes it is much later that the perfect response comes to mind, but it is too late. Not so with this woman. She was not to be toyed with nor was she going to be insulted while her daughter was dying. If he was going to use a cultural slur, then she would throw it right back at him. And she did when she said, “Even the dogs eat the children’s crumbs!” Touché!

I imagine Jesus’ eyes opened wide with surprise at the quickness and precision of this zinger! He may have even rocked back on his heels as if she had physically hit him. Then, after a moment of revelation, I suspect a grin spread across his face as he said, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

Jesus had just been schooled by a Gentile mom! He was taken to church by a Syrophoenician tigress.

I have to admit that this is a difficult picture of Jesus for me. I expect to see him eager to help anybody who comes his way, to open his arms to any need that surfaces, and to happily grant any wish for healing or help without question. I don’t expect to see Jesus looking and acting a lot like me when I just want to be left alone in peace and not bothered.

Human and divine. That’s a tough combination to wear every day. In this story, as well as in many other stories in the Gospels, Jesus reveals his humanity in clear and sometimes disturbing ways. Yet, I don’t expect Jesus to think and act like I do. I figure that I am supposed to think and act like Jesus does. Maybe I am.

One of the wonderful things about the Bible is that it does show us who Jesus was and is. Most of the time, we see the sweet little Jesus boy all cuddled in the manger or the precocious twelve year old Jesus grilling the teachers of Israel as he stands on the threshold of adulthood. We see a lot of the generous Jesus, the teaching and healing Jesus, and the Jesus who is willing to give his life for ours. On occasion we see the feisty Jesus putting the scribes and Pharisees in their place or clearing the temple of greed and abuse. We expect to see these faces of Jesus because they always shine with the light of righteousness. The face of Jesus we look at in this picture is red, not from the sun, but from the theological slap in the face he has received from this woman who is not a child of Israel but who knows that she is a child of God.

Scenes like this one make me squirm but also make me realize that, like Jesus, I can save face from my cultural biases by realizing my errors and correcting them. Jesus should never have used that slur against the woman and her child. When he realized what he had done, when he “came to himself,” to borrow language from another story he often told, Jesus did what was right. By whatever means he possessed, he healed the daughter of the illness that her mother believed was caused by a demon. With great excitement, she rushed home to a daughter who was alive and, with refreshed humility, Jesus settled back into his chair, let out a long sigh, and smiled into the sun, knowing he could finally rest.

It is a gift that we have stories like this one included in the Bible which tells us the long story of God’s relationship with his people. You know, if we never opened our Bibles, if we never came to church, if we never took the opportunity to talk with other people about our faith, we would never hear this story and discover the insight it holds for us. Granted, this brief story at the seashore pales in comparison to other stories like the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Sower of Seeds, or the Workers in the Vineyard. It is not nearly as familiar as stories like Jesus telling his disciples to be like little children or feeding the five thousand or healing the ten lepers. That is why we need to look for stories like this one so that we will learn other important things about Jesus—and ourselves.

Jesus doesn’t look so good in this story, but he learns something. We can almost see the light going off in his head as he realized how absurd his response to this worried mother was. She pointed out how offensive his attitude was, even if he did not intend to insult her. He realized that some of those things he learned as a boy playing in the dusty paths of Nazareth had tucked themselves into the nooks and crannies of his brain and heart. He needed to do some housecleaning. This story is included in the Bible so that we can learn from it and do our own internal housecleaning, if needed.

Because we do take seriously what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ (which is more than following him to the beach!), we know that we still have a lot to learn. Shouldn’t we talk with one another about how we live out our faith? Isn’t it helpful to discover for ourselves all that the Bible says instead of merely repeating what other people—including the preacher—tell us? Isn’t it wise to explore what our faith has to say about all of the things that are going on in the world and in our lives?

While Jesus and his disciples were making their way through Galilee on their journey to Jerusalem, he let them know that the best way to be faithful is to be faithful together. He established the community of faith, first among the twelve apostles, then among all of the disciples who followed him and listened to him and learned from him. Two thousand years later, we count ourselves among that special group.

As people of faith, we engage in study and discussion of the Bible in Sunday School, in study groups, and in worship. We give of ourselves in missions and ministry so that we might help other people and learn and grow in the process. We spend time alone reading, thinking, exploring, and praying so that when there is a knock on our door, we will be prepared and open to meet whatever need waits on the other side.

When Jesus' vacation was over, after resting and reflecting on what had happened with that Gentile woman, he started back toward home. Deciding to stay near the coast as long as possible, he soon came to another resort town, the town of Sidon. Sure enough, no sooner had he walked into town than a group of folks brought more people to be healed. Among them was a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. They wanted their friend to be healed.

I'm not certain, because the text doesn't tell us, but I suspect that this man was also a Gentile, a Syrophenician like the woman. This time, Jesus did not hesitate for a second. He took the man off from the crowd for a little privacy, touched his tongue, put his fingers in the man's ears, looked to heaven, and sighed. Why do you think he sighed? Frustration? Recurring weariness? Or, perhaps it was one of those sighs of satisfaction, accompanied by a knowing smile, an acknowledgment to the Father that this time he got it right. He had learned his lesson. Holding the deaf man close, he looked to heaven and offered a simple prayer: "Open up!"

I wonder if that prayer was not meant for that man alone. Granted, his ears opened and his speech was corrected, but I wonder if that prayer was meant also for someone else. It might have been a prayer for Jesus himself. He certainly had his heart opened wider by the Gentile woman. There is also the possibility that just maybe "Open up!" is a prayer for us, a prayer that we might have our hearts and minds opened as well. If we follow Jesus, it will be. Amen.

September 9, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of the ages, in our times of worship and in all the circumstances of our lives, we stand in awe of the generosity of your gifts to us, and with grateful hearts, we offer to you our thanks and praise. We give you thanks that you have called out faithful witnesses and have revealed your word of truth in all times and places. And we thank you that you call us and speak to us in this place and for our own time. As we gather here week by week for worship and fellowship, study and service, make of us faithful hearers and doers of your word. Disturb our ways of thinking and being until we are transformed in your image. Stretch and challenge us so that our lives might be open to respond to your call to a costly discipleship, and our hands and hearts open to serve the needs of those we are called to love. Speak to us in the beauty of your creation and through the lives which touch our own, and whisper to us in the still, small voice which calms our fears and gives us courage for our journey of faith.

God of this present moment, continue to guide us through Christ, who calls us, that we might live out his call faithfully. Give us words of hope to offer to those who need your assuring presence. Give us gentle hands and generous hearts to heal those whose bodies and spirits are plagued by illness. Give us strength enough to uphold those burdened by worry and weighed down with fears. Help us to be present with those who are lonely and fill us with compassion for those whose needs overshadow their hope. And may we, in all things, O God, remember to rely not on our own resources and abilities, but to depend upon your eternal source of love and grace. We pray in the name of the Christ who redeems us and by the power of the Spirit who sustains us. Amen.

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