

Sermon Notes

September 9, 2012

When to Speak

Scripture Passage: Mark 7: 24-37 also James 2: 1-17 should be read.

²⁴From there he 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, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

If you are attending our Wednesday evening Bible Study, you will recognize in the passage from James one of the great contrasts between the Catholic and Protestant Christian traditions. Bible Study is still open by the way and if you are interested, you are invited! We meet at 7PM and are discussing the differences between Catholic, Mormon, and Protestant traditions of worship. We are using the Book of Isaiah as our Biblical reference in this study. So far, we have learned that Catholics tend to look at the last line of verse 17 as a mandate to do good works in to gain access to heaven. Protestants, on the other hand believe that our works flow from our faith and are the only possible expression of the gratitude we feel at having been saved by the Grace of God through the Love of God given to us in Jesus Christ. We are allowed entry to heaven only by God's Grace alone through faith alone.

There are several verses omitted from today's passage in James. The passage is a hard one to read and accept because it reminds us of our own sin. James says in one of the omitted verses that murder is the same as adultery; which is to say, sin is sin. How easy it is for us to look at the sins of others point an accusing finger, but often when we look at our own sin we are willing to justify or give ourselves a pass.

Honestly, I wish James would have given a little less dramatic example to make his point. We all know murder is wrong. It is clearly a sin. We also know that adultery is wrong. It is easy for us to hear the murderer accusing the adulterer and laugh at the obvious absurdity. This is a clear example of the pot calling the kettle black. What about the person who covets and then accuses the adulterer?

Coveting is clearly a sin as it violates one of the 10 commandments, yet the coveter can accuse the adulterer or the murderer in our society without fear of judgment! What makes the message from James so difficult to hear is that in the message, we recognize that coveting is as much a sin in God's eyes as is murdering or adultery! God does not differentiate between sins! There is no degree of sin! Sin is sin and we recognize in this inescapable conclusion what the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 3. "All have sinned, and fallen short of the Glory of God!"

Perhaps we can accept this realization. After all, we as Protestant Christians affirm that we are all sinners saved by Grace through faith! This affirmation also comes from Paul's pen as he writes the letter to the Romans. As sinners saved by grace, we can live with our sins because we justify them and we do set them in degrees. My sins aren't so bad. Your sins aren't so bad. We can say this because as we look around our congregation, most of us look alike. Church on Sunday Morning is typically the most segregated hour in our American society. As we look around at others, we see ourselves and we can tolerate our shortcomings. We look just like everyone else.

But James pushes at that as well! He recognizes with us that if we have visitors who are well dressed, drive nice cars, speak politely and correctly; we are willing to invite them into our midst and receive them graciously, just as we would want to be received. On the other hand, if we have visitors to our congregation who come with less clean clothes, walk into our service, speak with different accents, we might tolerate their presence but we do not associate with them as easily or completely. What exactly are our responsibilities in these kinds of situations? How should we handle ourselves? When should we speak?

At the conclusion of our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus opens the ears and releases the tongue of a man in the region of the Decapolis. He then orders those who witness this healing to tell no one about it! The more he orders them, the more they proclaim Him! They have chosen to speak because of their witness to God's grace in such an amazing way! They want to praise a God who does what they ask for exactly when they ask and in exactly the way they ask. We all want to praise that God! We all want to honor that God! We all want to have a relationship with that God! The problem is God does not fit neatly into that box. We must consider the whole of the reading so we can more completely know our God!

A first reading of Mark's passage is equally hard for us to hear as the message from James. Jesus, after a confrontation with the Pharisees and scribes regarding religious tradition moves from his hometown

to a place called Tyre. There is no indication in scripture as to why he leaves. Perhaps he withdraws to pray, or to rest and prepare for the work that is ahead. We are not told. We are also not told if the disciples travel with him. What we are told is that he wants to be alone, to be unrecognized, to be secluded. His notoriety, however, precedes him. A woman recognizes him. She has a problem. It is not her own problem rather she wants healing for her little daughter. Jesus is no longer in his own land. The woman who approaches is a foreigner to him! She bows down and begs, not for herself, but for her daughter.

The hard part of this passage is to hear Jesus' response. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to throw their food to the dogs!" It seems as if Jesus is calling the woman a dog! It seems that this Jesus, the one who has been so compassionate, so caring in his homeland is now someone else! Are we hearing correctly?

There might be a temptation here to gloss over the passage. We can reconcile the original Greek language to understand that Jesus uses the word dog in the sense of a little puppy. We can give Jesus a pass by saying "how cute, he is comparing her to a little puppy." We can say that Jesus is just testing the woman. He wants to see if she will stand up for herself before he gives her what she wants. After all, we all know this is what he is going to do anyway. I think these interpretations, while making us more comfortable, shortchange the woman, Jesus, and us.

To get to a deeper meaning, we must understand a little of the culture of Jesus' day. In the western society in which we live, dogs have a very special place. They are part of the family. We invite them into our homes, feed them from our tables, dress them in cute little costumes, celebrate their birthdays, let them sleep in our beds and ride in our cars. In many other countries of the world, dogs are city scavengers. They forage through trash cans and around homes for whatever they can find to eat. They are beggars!

This was the relationship of dogs in Jesus' culture in the early first century. They were beggars. They competed with people who also had no regular source of food or shelter. Both the people and the dogs depended on the excess from others in order to exist. Begging was a way of life.

When Jesus traveled into a foreign territory, he knew that the message of scripture had not been received there. The message of the prophet Isaiah was that the poor and the orphaned were children of God just as the rich and powerful. The people of Israel knew this. It was the point of disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees in the passage immediately preceding this one. The disciples did not wash before eating because they were hungry. The Pharisees who were rich and powerful and knew where their next meal was coming from could stand on tradition. Hungry people don't stand on ceremony. They eat when food is available. The Pharisees looked down on people such as these. They judged them exactly as James reminds us we are not to do! We are all children of God!

The Syrophonecian woman did not know this about herself. She was hungry for the help of Jesus. She came and begged on her hands and knees as a dog would beg. Jesus was not calling her a dog! He was teaching her that she wasn't one! He wanted her to know that she was a child of God! She could come to him as an heir to the Kingdom. His message to her was that she could; she should speak. She could speak clearly and with confidence because it was God's great and good desire to give her the needs of her heart.

All of us should remember this lesson. On September 9, 1993 I received a phone call in my hotel room in Burlington, Vermont. It was the Burlington police department. They told me I needed to contact my parents immediately. The call I made changed my life. When I talked to my mom, I learned from her that my brother had been killed in a small airplane crash earlier that day near Washington D.C.. When I hung up the phone, I fell to my knees and cried out! I begged God to change this situation! I pleaded that what I had just heard was all a bad dream. I went to bed that night and woke up the next morning hoping that what I had heard was not real. Sadly, the situation did not change...but I did get up. Over the next few days and weeks I was reminded that I could get up and stand up and stay up because I am a child of God.

This woman understood the same message in Jesus response. She understood from him that she did not need to continue to beg. Instead of whimpering away, she stood up. She spoke to Jesus as a person. She did not ask for more than she needed. She only asked for her daily bread! She knew that the crumbs of God's word would be sufficient for her daughter. That's what she asked for! That's what she got!

Speak up all who are in need of healing! You are children of God. He will hear your voice and answer your prayer!

Speak up all who are beaten and battered and abused! You are children of God! He will hear your voice and answer your prayers!

Speak up all who are grieving and mourning! You are children of God! He will hear your voice and answer your prayers!

Speak up all who are hungry and in need of shelter! You are children of God! He will hear your voice and answer your prayers!

Speak up all who desire a relationship with the Lord! You are children of God! He will hear your voice and answer your prayers!

Speak up! God has put his fingers in your ears and touched your tongue and has given you the power to praise him! Speak up! Speak up! Speak up!

Now is the time to speak! You no longer need to ask when; now is the time! Now is the time for each of us to recognize that we are indeed children of God! We are all privileged to have voice and to use that voice for those who are poor, or orphaned or oppressed! Speak now! Speak now for God is listening! Amen

Next Week: Scripture: Mark 8: 27-38. Message: *Splinters!* This week we are asked one question and given one command. Who am I? Jesus asks. Take up your cross. Jesus commands. We want to answer and we want to do, but are we willing to bear the cost? How will the question and the command affect our lives. How can we live into Jesus' expectations? Come and Worship! Come and See!