

Sunday, September 5, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

Unbridled Grace

In the wake of a very difficult week in our nation and the world, and I know also for some of you personally, I want to start off with these words of praise for God's help in trying times.

Psalm 146

Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord, O my soul!
I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord!

INTRODUCTION

It may not always seem like it, but our God is forever faithful. David's Psalm was not written from a place of mere hope or blind faith. This is his lived experience. How can he NOT praise God? And yes, even to this hour, our God is faithful and only good. Our God is forever with us and is manifest through us as we follow in the Way of Jesus. Week in and week out we continue to open ourselves to understanding the good news of the Gospel, and often we are challenged by what we read and struggle to wrestle out the wisdom, the truth imbedded in these stories, the blessing God is offering. This week's Gospel reading does just that. If you were with us last week, we looked at Mark's account of Jesus challenging the religious leaders and

temple authorities. In a sharp and direct verbal exchange, he publicly chastises these powerful men. He insists that they abandon all their false religious pretense and instead focus on the authenticity of our mutual vulnerability. The work of faith, Jesus teaches, begins with internal humility not exclusivity.

Now, this week we immediately pick up where we left off. Following this scathing rebuke, he gets out of Dodge, as it were. Who can blame him? He goes north to a Gentile region called Tyre. And what we are about to read about now is a decisive turning point in the story, a major plot point that spins us in a new direction. By retreating to this area, and ministering to the Gentiles, Jesus opens a far wider door for God's salvation, he offers a far more inclusive understanding of God's liberating invitation for ALL people. And, as you may well imagine, this is a fiercely scandalous, never before imagined idea about God's enormous love and expansive grace. How can it be that God's desire is for all people to come into the fold; sinners and saints, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, rich and poor, republicans and democrats? Yet, this is the outrageously radical message found in the Gospel of Mark.

SCRIPTURE

Mark 7:24-37 (NRSV)

[Jesus] then 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 Syrophenician 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."

The word of God for the people of God.



PLEASE PRAY WITH ME;

*Lord Jesus Christ, we are often as bewildered as the disciples.
Open us up as you opened the ears of the deaf man.
open our minds and hearts to receive your truth.*

Come Holy Spirit, Come. And, may my words and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN

My family moved a lot when I was growing up. And, I don't mean like a military family that moves from one base to another. I mean complete culture shifts. In first grade, for instance I moved from a shiny new state of the art suburban school in the affluent suburb of Glastonbury, Connecticut to a two room, wood heated school house in the tiny town of Bridgton, Maine. When you're 6 or 7 years old, you're fairly adaptable, but still it was pretty unsettling. The cranky old woman who was my first-grade teacher in Bridgton remains one of the most terrifying figures of my life! Later, when I was just starting middle school, we moved from the small town of Cumberland, Maine to the big city of Manchester, New Hampshire. This was a real city. It had "walk" signs at the intersections and an entire public transportation system! Now I know that no matter what, nearly every 7th grader feels out of place, but to also be the new kid in this vast middle school building with multiple floors, endless lockers, and more people in the halls than I had ever seen in one place in my life made my head spin. I **knew** I didn't fit in and that feeling of being the only outsider is horrible. There is nothing quite like it really. You know what I mean because almost all of us have had that experience at one time or another. I think Tina Fey really nailed it in her iconic movie, *Mean Girls*. It is awful. Even as adults, we all have this strong desire to fit in, to be accepted, valued and worthy. So, very often we change to fit in, we conform, even if it runs against who we really are and what our higher values might be. To belong is a powerful force, and it seems like a prerequisite to belonging somehow requires identifying, tormenting and ridiculing those who don't belong. The identity of the insider is largely defined by a disdain for the outsider. No one wants to be the outlier.

It was the same way in the first century Palestine, the sectarian and social class lines between insiders and outsiders were crystal clear and well understood by everyone. There were the Romans and their dominant tyranny, the few wealthy merchants and many poor people who served them. There were the politically powerful and those they had power over. Generally speaking, Gentiles enjoyed a wider social acceptance than the Jews, but for the most part, the Jews kept to their territory in the south and their long-standing archenemy, the Phoenician Gentiles, kept to the north-eastern coast of Syria. Tyre and Sidon were both in Syria. So, this is why Mark is so specific in pointing out that Jesus went north. One day, after scolding the pharisees about their hypocrisy, Jesus boldly ventures deep into the outsider's camp to hide out for a while. We don't know anything about the house he found to stay in. Maybe it was an out of the way air B&B he rented out with his disciples, but clearly, in this foreign land he was somehow among friendlies. Even here in the north, among the Gentiles, his reputation as a healer was well known. Up until this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus had primarily offered his teaching, healing and message in Jewish territory. In the south, he was an insider, a Jew ministering to Jews. Now, he specifically chooses to journey into what is known to be a hostile territory. It's like he and his friends decide

to claim a table in the school cafeteria – it’s pretty risky business. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, this Gentile, Syrophenician woman burst, uninvited, into their house. In sheer desperation and remarkable courage, she disregards all the boundaries of social acceptability and throws herself at the feet of this foreign healer, begging him to cast out the demon that possesses her daughter. And here is where the story gets really weird. The Jesus I think I know would immediately have compassion for this woman but I am shocked to hear him berate her! “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” In effect, he is rudly dismissing her and saying, ‘my power is for Jews first, over and above Gentiles.’ Is he actually calling her a dog????!! He sounds like an arrogant insider bolstering his position by slamming this outsider. I don’t know about you but I’m on her side! Yet, her tenacity is unshakable, even after this humiliating response she will not give up. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” This cunning response shows us the powerful strength found in humility and an extreme faith in God’s goodness. In fact, her response is so moving that Jesus seems to change his mind completely. He flips 180 degrees, “For saying that, he says to her, “you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

To be honest this story is a hard one to know how to interpret. It seems so out of character for Jesus. We are told that he was looking for a break. He didn’t want anyone to know he was there. Perhaps we can infer that he was probably pretty tired and maybe even emotionally crispy. Maybe he snapped at her because this was commonly acceptable way to treat outsiders when you’re among the inside group. We really don’t know. But maybe he had a larger plan in mind. He could have been acting the part of a powerful Jewish man in the presence of a lowly Gentile woman in order for HER to demonstrate a greater faith and a deeper wisdom to the insiders. It all could have been theatre to shock the insiders into understanding God differently. This I do know; this marginalized Gentile mother knew more about the expansiveness of God’s mercy than any insider present in that house. Once again, we see how it is so often the outsiders who to seem to understand God’s lavish grace way more than the inside group. And maybe that is the point. No matter how you might interpret this scene, the lesson is the same. Wherever Jesus goes, the circle of God’s mercy and grace widens out further and further to ALL people. There is no boundary Jesus won’t cross or tear down. And for this lavish generosity, he will be killed.

Maybe you feel like an outsider today in some part of your life. Maybe even among us here at TriCon you may feel marginalized, like you don’t really fit in, or are underrepresented or not really heard. I know how that feels and it breaks my heart. But here is what I learn from this story and so many more lessons pulled from scripture; there is great wisdom that can only come from the outsiders. It is the ones we might consider our enemy, the misfits, the socially awkward, the foreigners and immigrants who will open us up to understand more fully the abundant generosity and unbridled grace of God. God’s expansive love is wider than we might think or dare to even imagine. William Sloan Coffin wisely said, “If the gospel is truly good news, it has to be good news for everyone. It is either an inclusive gospel on no

gospel at all." The fact is that if we want to truly love God, we must begin by loving those whom God loves. In a time of sharp divisions, social acceptability, cancel culture and loudly applauded demonization of the other, it is critically important for followers of Jesus to work hard at tearing down these boundaries, to question our prejudices, check our presumptions and, like Jesus said to that deaf Gentile in a hostile land, "Be open." There is no doubt that we all belong to one another, from the Dalai Lama to that woman begging along the stop light at Fresh Pond. We need each other.

May we all be continually surprised by God's ways, may we always be opening up, ever moving outward to understand more fully and be totally overwhelmed by God's expansive grace for all sides at all times for all people.

AMEN