

**Sunday, September 9 + 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**[Mark 7:24-37](#)**

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI

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Our Gospel reading today is a perfect expression of God's abundance. Abundance of what? Of God's love, a power that is stronger than anything else in the universe: Love brought everything into being. Abundance of Christ's mercy, which flows to us in endless measure forgiveness, which we never deserve, as Jesus stands with us no matter what. And abundance of hope, with which the Spirit fills our hearts to overflowing. All this awareness of God's abundance in the form of a simple woman with an unlikely request of Jesus, Son of David, Son of God.

This reading also reminds us that God's reign, which broke into the world through Jesus Christ, is neither easily regulated nor carefully distributed. The abundance this kingdom brings has a tendency to burst the seams and to spill out in all directions. Abundance, by definition, is something that exists in such large quantities that it can't be regulated or contained. But most importantly, this passage expands our understanding of what counts as real faith.

Here in Mark 7 we encounter a woman who refuses to take "No" for an answer. Jesus has traveled to a distant region for some unknown purpose. He's trying to keep his presence there a secret, but this woman finds him anyway. She is from Syrophonecia, a

Roman province in Syria. In other words, she is a Gentile and not a Jew—an outsider. Her daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit and the woman is desperate to have her cured. She bows at Jesus' feet and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

It's fascinating to compare this story with the way it's told in Matthew Chapter 15. Matthew, Mark, and Luke come from the same general tradition and share many of the same accounts. We know Mark was the earliest, so it's interesting to observe how Matthew and Luke embellish these stories from their own cultural perspectives.

Mark tells us that "She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter." Begging by definition means that, at least at first, one's request is not granted. Otherwise it would just be asking. Matthew runs with this idea and portrays this woman in much more aggressive terms. I didn't watch any of the Supreme Court nominee hearings, in Matthew this scene might have been like that. The woman is repeatedly shouting at Jesus: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, for my daughter is tormented by a demon! Have mercy on me, Lord! Have mercy!" In Matthew Jesus doesn't respond, and the disciples—who aren't present in Mark—keep telling Jesus to send her away "because she keeps shouting after us."

The scene is less boisterous in Mark, but the result is the same: Jesus refuses—at first. He shocks our sensibilities by telling the woman, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The reference to dogs isn't as bad as it sounds; house dogs of the time were much appreciated in cleaning up

the floor beneath the dinner table, as they still are today. We called our beloved Golden Retriever Sparky a “canine vacuum cleaner.”

Jesus’ refusal may shock us too. Why doesn't he just do it? Isn't he endlessly compassionate? Doesn't he always heal people right away when they ask?

In saying "Let the children be fed *first*," Jesus is only implying that the time is not right. Blessings *will* come to non-Jewish people, but for now his work is on behalf of Jews. His answer is not "Absolutely not," but "Not just yet."

What's most fascinating about this interaction is that the woman does not take Jesus' initial refusal as his final answer. We probably couldn't imagine arguing with Jesus. But this woman does. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She is making the point that the abundance of mercy Jesus proclaims is available to Gentiles—to everyone--just as it is to Jews. The crumbs that fall from the table are the overflowing abundance of love and mercy from God that Jesus brings.

Jesus is impressed by her logic—so impressed that he *does* change his mind. She is right that there is not only enough, but *more* than enough. Feeding 5,000 people? No problem, and there are plenty of leftovers. God's undeserved mercy, which we call grace, is limitless and available to all hearts that are open. “For saying that,” Jesus tells her, “you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

Today we celebrate this nameless woman for the persistence of her faith. Did you notice something else in the reading? Her faith is so strong that she heads for home fully

trusting that Jesus has cured her daughter, just as he said. Not, “Well, when I get home I’ll see if what you promised really came true.”

Do we possess that same persistence of faith? Sometimes it’s hard to muster, when forces of evil that are still active in the world tempt us to just give up on it.

Consider the Roman Catholic Church in Pennsylvania. A few weeks ago, just before school started, a grand jury report was released that accused 300 Catholic "predator priests" of abusing more than a thousand children over the years in six Pennsylvania dioceses, including Pittsburgh, where 99 of those priests served.

The report tells in painful detail how Church officials regularly chose to protect accused priests, and the Church itself, instead of protecting children. The pattern of abuse was perpetuated according to what the grand jury called a "playbook for concealing the truth." Accused priests were sent to church-run psychiatric centers and subjected to half-hearted investigations by their fellow clergy. If a priest was removed from his position, parishioners were not told why, and the priests were often transferred to a new parish where the congregation was unaware of the accusations against him. One person’s response was probably typical of many church members: “You're angry, and you're heartbroken, and your faith is a bit shaken,” he said.

Now a new school year has begun, and some parents and church leaders are still avoiding the truth revealed in the report. This refusal does not strengthen faith, it weakens it. On the first day of the new year at one elementary school in Pittsburgh where there were documented instances of abuse, nothing was said and no words were

offered about how to be on the alert for abuse in the future. A Catholic high school parent who was also interviewed said that the report had not shaken the faith of her two children, because she had told them that priests are just people, and what happened was not the fault of the church. But these priests did not behave as we would expect “just people” would, and perpetuation of the abuse *was* the fault of the church.

Back to the woman in our Gospel reading. Persistence is defined as “firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition.” To be persistent in our faith, as this woman was, we must first see things as they really are. Although she was an outsider, somehow this woman clearly saw the abundance of grace that Jesus was proclaiming, and recognized the power of the “food,” so to speak, that he was distributing. She did not pretend to be anything other than what she was. *“Look, Mister, I'm not asking for a seat at the table. My daughter is suffering. All I need from you is a crumb or two. I know that will do the job. But I'm going to need it right now. Parents of really sick children don't wait around.”*

The elementary school whose leaders said nothing shielded parents and students from the truth. The faith the Catholic high school mom was instilling in her children also shielded them from the truth. Those on the receiving end cannot see things as they really are, and so whatever faith they think they might have in the church cannot be fully authentic.

Things happen all the time that have the capacity to badly shake our faith, just as revelations of priestly abuse have all over the world. What things, in our sphere of life?

The suicide of a family member, or friend, or mentor, such as the popular young lead pastor of a megachurch in Chino, California, who committed suicide last week. Their faith in their spiritual leaders is shaken. A nation that is so deeply divided that we can't even believe it's gotten to this point. Faith in the principle of democracy on which this country was founded is shaken. People who recklessly kill innocent bystanders. People who intentionally kill innocent bystanders. Faith in the goodness of humanity is shaken.

Persistence in faith means never letting go of the conviction that God in Christ through the Holy Spirit is always at work in the world, and that evil will never triumph over love. Persistence in faith means clinging to Jesus as a certain presence in circumstances of life, comforting us in our sorrow and leading us with his rod and staff through the darkest valleys. Persistence in faith means that we live out of the conviction that God's love is always flowing into our hearts, and that it overflows into the world as we return this love to God in greater measure by loving and serving our neighbors.

Faith without works is dead, James tells us in today's second reading. Each of you is a person of great faith. I know this by looking into your eyes. I also know that God is calling each of you to express your faith through your own unique gifts in a world that is starving for the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ.

I invite you to consider how your faith may be expressed in the life of this congregation above and beyond just coming to church. We are the body of Christ in the world. Like a human body, we are a living, breathing, entity that is trying to grow into the fullness of life in Christ. How can the tangible expressions of your faith contribute to

the well-being of this body—and not just its health, but its flourishing? All things are possible with God, and all things are possible here. Be bold in your persistence in faith, and let's really see this place come alive.

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