

Persistent Love

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Tradition tells us that King Solomon is the giver of the good wisdom we find in the book of Proverbs. A man as wealthy and privileged as Bill Gates or Warren Buffet, speaks to us now of the power of a good name and the privilege of caring for the poor. Listen for the Word of the Lord...

Scripture: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

22:1 A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.

22:2 The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.

22:8 Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail.

22:9 Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

22:22 Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate;

22:23 for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Our gospel reading today may make you wonder if the gospel has gone to the dogs. For many of us Jesus is unbecoming at best and unfaithful at worst. But perhaps there is more than meets the eye. Last week you read about Jesus' critique of the false piety of the Pharisees. Jesus is teaching that it is what is in the heart that matters most to God. In today's reading we see the heart and vulnerability of Jesus himself. Here, Jesus is taught by an outsider, a Gentile, a Syrophenician woman. Jesus, the teacher, becomes the student. Listen for the Spirit's voice...

Mark 7:24-30

7:24 From there (Jerusalem) 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,

7:25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

7:26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

7:27 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."

7:28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

7:29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter."

7:30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Proclamation of the Word

I imagine she had looked everywhere for help.

Her daughter was afflicted with a demon.

She had tried traditional doctors to no avail.

She had tried to find a counselor and kept knocking on doors. No one was taking new clients.

She fought her insurance company and even went out of network to find the help her daughter so desperately needed.

She had even resorted to homeopathic remedies. Her neighbor sent her to a local healer who turned out to be a sort of witch doctor.

The priests wanted nothing to do with her. Demons seemed outside their influence as if they lacked the authority over demons.

I imagine she knows how it feels to be a parent of a child with a disability or health issue- mental or physical. Doggedly seeking every route of care for her child. Paid Tutors. Support through the schools for special services. An expensive evaluation to prove that her child was in need. She had turned over every rock. Fought when she needed to. Collapsed in tears when she found yet another road block.

No one fights harder than a feisty mother whose child is in need.

She tried to protect her child's privacy, but the stares and the whispers got to her. If her child had cancer, there would have been casseroles at the door step and community wide support for her child. A Caring Bridge site would have been set up by her friends at the church so they could all be praying for her daughter.

But demons? No one knows what to do with a demon.

II. THEN she heard he was coming. Jesus could not escape notice. Stories of his healing work proceeded him. And here he was in foreign territory, Tyre, among the Gentiles. A Jewish rabbi in Gentile territory. Imagine that. She was desperate. So she went house to house, door to door to find him without a male, taboo in those days. It was as if he were hiding. But she was determined. She persisted. **No one fights harder than a feisty mother whose child is in need.** And then she found him in his room with the "Do not disturb" sign on the door.

Have you ever been looking for God and even God cannot be found?

Some will travel to far off holy spots to see if they can find God- a trip to the mountaintop or retreat to the wilderness. Others seek to see the face of Jesus in the face of the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, the persecuted. Some wish to be lost in worship, hearing again the words of God, getting lost in a song, and tasting God in the sweetness of bread and cup at a table surrounded by others standing in the need of prayer, of grace.

Those are surely places to find God, but what about when God seems to not want to be found?

Jesus is hiding out in a house. Mark tells us, "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice..."

The Lord of the universe does not want anyone to know he was there. At first glance, that chafes at me. I know his purpose is to bring healing, saving love to the people of God. And yet, even the Lord needs time to rest, to renew, or to attend to another priority. Not in any way to compare pastors to Jesus, but the pastors I know who try to be available all the time seem to be in the worst shape. I see a chiropractor for a lifelong back issue, and he says that pastors are by far in worse physical shape than any other folks he sees regularly. And pastors are not the only ones affected by our always-on, always available culture. I know folks who left good jobs because they were expected to be available 24/7 by cell phone- text, email, calls at any and all hours. Maybe Jesus is just showing us that there are rhythms to work and rest, just as they are woven into Creation itself. God made evening, then morning, set boundaries between the day and night. God divided the land from the sea. God rested on the 7th day and called it holy Sabbath. Even the Lord of heaven and earth needs rest. So I get Jesus' desire to be focused and not be found, even if he cannot escape notice. I have just enjoyed the benefit and gift of a Sabbatical- and time seems to be the most precious gift and one on short supply sometimes. I understand.

But the part I cannot understand is why Jesus speaks to the woman who approaches him in such a hateful way. When she asks for help for her daughter, his response is harsh, rude, and dismissive. A woman begs for his help, lying prostrate at his feet, and all he can think to say is this, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

The girl then is a dog- less than human. I don't have to tell you that calling people dogs is a way to dehumanize and objectify. If people are seen as animals, then we can deny them dignity and fair treatment. So it is disturbing to hear Jesus speak these words, as if Jesus' own kin, the Hebrew people, have priority over those outside the circle. If you have always been inside the circle, Jesus seems to be standing with you, but if you have been left out of the circle, or denied a place at the table, Jesus' words are stinging-insulting even. Jesus seems to understand his mission only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," the ethnically pure, first people of God. We can all forget that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. And here, Jesus' humanity is showing- maybe a bit too much for our liking. Jesus is tired, irritable, exhausted, and rude. Have ever behaved that way when you are at the end of our rope? I know I have. And it is usually the people I love the most that pay the price.

Rather than get stuck there, I wonder at the courage and tenacity of the mother, who respectfully asserts, but "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." I am amazed at her dignity and strength, her humility and love. Are you?

Jesus is awed by her, too. And for speaking up Jesus replies, "For saying that, you may go- the demon has left your daughter." Maybe he has a wry grin, by now, knowing he just been taught by the woman, reminded of who he is called to be. Jesus comes to his senses again.

This mother who has knocked on every door to get help for her daughter.

This mother who in dignity and power speaks for her daughter who cannot help herself.
No one fights harder than a feisty mother whose child is in need.
She haschutzpah.
She persists at every door shut in her face, every insult hurled for the sake of her beloved child.
This is the kind of character that not only gets the attention of Jesus, but helps bring healing and mercy upon her daughter.

Even Jesus is reminded of the wasteful mercy of God, that not only offers crumbs, but a full loaf of good news- a life changing, transforming feast of goodness and love. Jesus is reminded that his mission includes the Gentiles, all people created in the image of God. And contrary to what we dog lovers believe, God is not a dog, and neither are any of God's children, created in the image of God.

No merit or deserving on the part of the recipient, just the extravagant wastefulness that reminds us that there is more than enough for everyone. Jesus does not demand her to recognize his divinity, but shows her his humanity. When our limited hearts believe that God's goodness, dignity and mercy are only for the deserving, we see Jesus demonstrate that God's abundance is not a scarce commodity. God's grace, mercy, and dignity for all humanity is enough and more than enough. In fact, the more it is dished out, the more there is. When rights, dignity, and grace are extended, they do not diminish, they flourish. We flourish.

Maybe Jesus needed that reminder that God is like a feisty mother who will go to any length to help her child in need. God speaks on behalf of the poor, the lost, the lonely, the left-out. God is determined that her children are cared for because they are beloved. God speaks and acts for you, a beloved child of God. And when God seems hard to find or to be hiding, know that you will be found by a God who loves with a fierce tenderness.

I wonder then where you and I are called this week to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. Who are we to love with that same risk, strength, and fierce tenderness?

Let's proclaim with our words and our actions that God's mercy and love are wasted on no one!

Benediction

You may feel like you have been knocking on doors, desperately seeking help, and feel you have come up empty.

But the God who persists like a feisty mother, knows you and loves you, redeems, heals, and sustains you.

This God sends you forth renewed, and ready to speak for those who have no voice and to care for the lost, the least, the left-out.

So go. Go filled with the love of God, renewed by the grace of our Lord Christ Jesus, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.