

September 9 – Pentecost +16

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

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+22:1-23>

James 2:1-10, 14-17

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+2:1-17>

Mark 7:24-37

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7:24-37>

Let's begin with taking a quick look at a few verses from Proverbs:

The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all. (Pr. 22:2)

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

Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate (Pr. 22:22)

In each of these verses, and throughout scripture, there's special recognition for poor people, but not just those who are literally financially poor, but those who are powerless and victims of their circumstances. When passages mention the poor they might implicitly refer to widows, orphans, foreigners and those who are impoverished. Each of these groups are marginalized, sometimes outcast, but they live on the peripheries, on the borders of a patriarchal society...they're not integrated or included, they're not seen, heard, or valued. Consequently they can be easy targets by those with power, those with money or influence. But as our passage in Proverbs points out, regardless of how humankind might characterize certain individuals, the Lord is the maker of all people. People who are generous are blessed because they share with those less fortunate. And there is the admonition or warning not to rob the poor who are powerless or crush those seeking justice at the gate. "The gate" was the place in ancient Israel where court was held. So this verse is describing the victims at the court. But if cheating goes on in the court -- if the widow, the orphan, and poor are not treated fairly, there is Someone watching over them. The Lord pleads their cause, like an advocate in a courtroom.¹ The theme of caring for the powerless runs through the Bible, and throughout our readings today, which call us to examine ourselves and our practices. So let's keep this reading from Proverbs in mind when we look at the other two passages.

James asks, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? Hasn't God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?²

James makes his point using a hypothetical example: a rich man enters a gathering...gold-ringed in shiny clothes in contrast to someone else who comes in meager, wearing tattered, dirty

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3764 James Limburg

² Aymer

clothes. If people of faith treat them differently, ...³ James says they have become judges with evil thoughts.⁴ That sounds kind of harsh though. Aren't we all more likely to pay attention to the wealthy person than the simple one? Wouldn't we treat celebrities and superstars differently if they came in this morning, perhaps better than we treat each other, or more favourably than a stranger who also showed up this Sunday?

Or what if the difference wasn't money but race? What if two people were to walk in, one person white wearing a nice top and black pants, the other a coloured person wearing some kind of ethnic clothing, a sari or daishiki. Do you think we'd treat them the same?

It's interesting what happens when we introduce ethnicity in the mix, as we see in our gospel reading. Maybe Jesus is just looking for some down time when we ventures away from traditional Jewish lands. Our reading says that Jesus went away to the region of Tyre and "entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice." Does this sound familiar? About a month and a half ago we looked at Jesus trying to ditch the crowds to spend some quiet moments with His disciples, but the people get to where Jesus and the disciples are taking their boats, and Jesus has compassion for the crowds and begins to teach them. Well Jesus might be looking for rest again this time, but the response is much, much different than we see in the previous chapter. Even in this gentile region, it seems, word has spread about Jesus,⁵ and we get this encounter that seems very different from others.

We should start by noting that the woman who approaches Jesus breaks through every traditional barrier that should have prevented her from doing so. She's "a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin," in other words, she is implicitly impure, she's someone who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, she's a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. Furthermore this woman is unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, and has the audacity to initiate a conversation with a strange man, Jesus, who she does not know – yet another taboo.⁶

And on top of all of this, the reason why she's here, her daughter is possessed by a demon. We can only imagine what sort of impact this would have had on her own social standing or reputation. This woman and her daughter weren't the kind of people that others would want to associate with, Jewish or gentile.⁷

Every way you look at it, this woman is an outsider. And what's more intriguing, Jesus basically says this to her face point blank. When this gentile woman falls at Jesus' feet and begs Him to heal her daughter, Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Geez....couldn't Jesus have picked another metaphor? The "children" in this statement are the Israelites, meaning everyone else, gentiles and all other peoples were the "dogs."⁸

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3774 Margaret Aymer

⁴ Aymer

⁵ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3761 Elisabeth Johnson

⁶ Johnson

⁷ Johnson

⁸ Johnson

How could Jesus say such a thing? Some interpreters propose that Jesus is testing the woman to get her to demonstrate her faith. Others propose that here we see we see the very human side of Jesus, exhausted and needing a break, or perhaps not yet understanding the scope of His own mission. While we can't know exactly what Jesus was thinking, it's clear that when approached by the Syrophenician woman, Jesus' immediate response is to appeal to the limits of His mission, His call to serve His own people, no one else. In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus begins by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."⁹

But the gentile mother comes back at Jesus with a clever, humble response, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." If you've had a dog, or know someone who has, sometimes not even two seconds go by from the moment a scrap of food hits the floor before it's in the dog's mouth. Some animals wait eagerly for a chance when some of the delicious goods on the table make their way to the floor. And at this response Jesus can only agree. "For saying that, you may go, Jesus says. The demon has left your daughter." Jesus can only agree that God's love and healing power go beyond human-made ethnic, political, or social boundaries. So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."¹⁰

The second part of the gospel reading reiterates the first. Jesus heads off to the region of the Decapolis, also gentile territory. Maybe Jesus is still seeking to escape notice and rest a bit, or perhaps even has a new vision of mission beyond the borders of Israel. In any case, once again escaping notice proves impossible. "They brought to him a deaf man who also had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him."¹¹

Like the Syrophenician woman, this man is an outsider too. He's cut off from the world by his inability to hear and communicate with others. This time Jesus doesn't hesitate to respond to a desperate request from a gentile. Jesus takes the man aside, puts His fingers in the man's ears, spits, and touches the man's tongue, and then says "Ephphatha!" which means, "Be opened!" Suddenly this man is able to hear and communicate with those around him. Not only is he physically healed, he is also restored to his community.¹² This man, whose name is unknown, will no longer be on the margins of society because he is now capable of being integrated with social and cultural norms. This person's encounter with Jesus isn't just a demonstration of Jesus' ability to heal, it's also an illustration of how this person's is changed, made whole, and given the fullness of life and opportunity that was not there before.

These stories are especially appropriate for a Sunday which unofficially marks the beginning of another year for many congregations. Most kids are back in school, summer is all but gone, and we begin to plan for the Fall, which will be marked by transition in more than one way. But how do these stories speak to us in light of the recent resurgence of nationalism, racism, and xenophobia in western culture?¹³

⁹ Matthew 15:24

¹⁰ Johnson

¹¹ Johnson

¹² Johnson

¹³ Johnson

For most of us we're used to having a place at the table, but perhaps we need to be reminded that none of us on our own holds any right or privilege whatsoever to be at the Lord's Table. Our place at the table is given to us by grace, we are gifted a seat because God is generous and compassionate with all peoples, and especially those who are powerless. We all come as beggars to the table, and it is solely by God's grace that we are fed.

We tend to forget that God became fully human not only for the sake of solidarity with the joys and pains of humanity, but also for the sake of telling us the truth about our human nature – which always attempts to put barriers up and characterize by one attribute or another, whether it be income, skin colour, gender, or something else.¹⁴

Maybe this text can guide us as we begin a year when we think about what inclusion means. What is the vastness of God's vision, the immensity of God's mission? After all, we know just how deeply God loves the whole world¹⁵ but perhaps we need to also be reminded that God's table is immeasurably larger than we can imagine.

Part of my ministry has been planting seeds. And as my formal ministry comes to an end next month, I can't help but wonder what will happen to those seeds. One seed is around communion, and a few lines that we have in red on the powerpoint during the lines around the breaking of bread: this is the Lord's Table, and it is Jesus who invites us. Anyone who loves God is welcome to share the bread and the cup.

When we properly exegete and interpret the gospel, we see that God's love and grace is infinitely greater and bigger than we can possibly imagine. Where we prefer to put up barriers, God removes them, from gentiles, from women.

And it's all well and good for us to think about these scriptures in our practices, in our worship services and faith, but again let's consider the reading from James. What does it mean for us to love our neighbors, especially those of a lower economic class from us? Or those who find themselves with less power or a weaker voice? If we apply what James is writing about, we are challenged to examine how we treat all people, such as refugees and immigrants, people of colour, indigenous peoples, members of the LGBTQ community.¹⁶

James' assertions prompt self-examination, especially for those of us who are part of the dominant culture.¹⁷ So again this week, we are invited to consider how we will live out our faith together, in ways that reflect God's mercy and also benefit the marginalized.¹⁸

¹⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5216> Karoline Lewis

¹⁵ Lewis

¹⁶ Aymer

¹⁷ Aymer

¹⁸ Aymer