

Sermon – “Unmuted Voices”

Scripture – James 2:1-17, Mark 7:24-37

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Our first reading comes from the epistle of James, and cautions us very forcefully against partiality in how we treat those around us, and also makes it quite clear that what we do for those around us tells the truest picture of our faith. Hear now these words from James, chapter 2, verses 1 through 17.

1 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? **2** For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, **3** and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," **4** have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? **5** Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not 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? **6** But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? **7** Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? **8** You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **9** But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. **10** For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. **11** For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. **12** So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. **13** For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. **14** What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? **15** If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, **16** and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? **17** So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. Here ends the first reading.

Our Gospel reading tells us a story of when Jesus travelled to two somewhat distant regions early in his ministry and had a pair of encounters with foreigners asking to be healed. Listen for the Word of the Lord to you now, as we visit the seventh chapter of Mark, verses 24 through 37.

24 From 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, **25** but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. **26** Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. **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." **28** But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." **29** Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." **30** So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. **31** 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. **32** They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. **33** He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. **34** Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and

said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: "Unmuted Voices"

The text: "Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go...'" Mark 7:29b

"My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"¹ It is with quite a challenge that our first scripture reading from James begins. This bit of scripture certainly cannot be accused of being boring. It is launched like a projectile at its hearers, especially when we recall the denunciation of faith without works at the end. Favoritism in our works of faith is our topic, then; let us go on an exploration of what James has thrown at us.

Our second reading, from the Gospel according to Mark, is an excellent place to tackle this. Now, just to clarify the relationship between these two readings: The epistle of James is essentially an open letter addressed to all the Jewish Christians scattered everywhere in the world. We read James first today, out of the liturgical habit of focusing most centrally on the Gospel by reading it last. But the events depicted by Mark, the events in the life of Jesus himself, took place much earlier. It is these events which gave rise to the faith that James is working to develop and explain, so when we jump to the second reading, we are jumping back in time, to where we can try to see what James might be talking about and where he gets it from.

Favoritism, faith, and works combine openly, in an unexpected way, in this passage from Mark. Here we have two stories of healings, the first of a little girl at the request of her mother, and the second of a man who cannot hear and had trouble speaking. These, too, are anything but boring, especially the first one, which is quite astounding and unexpected. A woman comes up to Jesus, asking for healing for her daughter, and he responds by insulting her.

Now the mere fact of Jesus insulting people is actually less unusual than we may think. We don't often focus directly on some of his harsher language, but he spends a remarkable amount of time rebuking the high and mighty religious leaders of the day. This, however, is different, and it is unusual. It isn't some self-righteous, powerful person he is speaking to, it is a woman bowing down before him and asking for her daughter to be cured. Here is a foreign woman who has heard of him and sought him out, humbling herself to a Jewish teacher, showing faith in his God. What does Jesus say in response? "[I]t is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."²

Insult toward hypocrisy seems fair. We cheer for insult toward oppressive leadership. We are okay when Jesus insults those who have turned the temple into a profit-making enterprise. But this kind of insult? Referring to other people as dogs, based (as far as the story tells us) only on their ethnic origin? Not expected. How can we understand this?

Occasionally one hears treatment of this passage where the insult is glossed over by noticing that the word for dogs is in the diminutive form, "little dogs," which we can massage into "puppies" and make it sound almost affectionate. I am not going to take us down that road. It does not really

¹ James 2:1 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Mark 7:27b (NRSV).

matter which word we use; Jesus is contrasting some people with other people by calling some of them children and others animals, and the question on the table is denying a cure to a little girl with a demon. Using a friendlier animal word doesn't really get us anywhere. We are stuck wrestling with this.

Well, except I did at one point think of one really easy way out of the problem. "Aha!" I thought. "What if Jesus's words were meant *literally*? Maybe Jesus just knew that this woman was the sort of person who refers to her pet dog as her 'daughter'." Unfortunately, I was unable to find any evidence to support this hypothesis, so I was forced to abandon it.

What are the real possibilities, then? We might ask: is it something other than ethnicity that prompts Jesus's response? Perhaps, but the woman's ethnic group is basically the only thing about her that the Gospel writer mentions. Mark presumably considers this episode instructive in some way, and for him to leave out important explanatory details would make little sense, which makes this suggestion unlikely.

Now, if we really want to allow scripture to challenge us, and it is my contention that we always should be prepared to allow this, being thorough does require us to consider the possibility that Jesus was speaking in full righteousness and that it is our own ideas of fairness, kindness, and inclusivity that are wrong. I am quite convinced that, being as blind in the world as we are, and our moral systems being as formed by the misguided world around as they are, every one of us does have major tenets of moral belief that are flat-out mistaken and wrong, and we will in the end discover some things of which we need to repent, of which we today have no idea.

But here I tend not to think this is the answer. Why? Because the idea that God's love isn't broad enough that it includes all the people, or arguing that true fairness includes treating some people better than others, does not agree easily with what Jesus goes on to say and do later throughout his ministry and teaching, nor with themes we see all the way back to the very early stories of the Old Testament. Regularly in the Old Testament, it is repeated that there is just one law, for both the people of Israel and for the foreigners who come among them. The foreigners are in from the very start, in God's promise to Abraham: "[I]n you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."³

So if excluding the outsider is wrong, why does Jesus do it? Was Jesus simply being mean and morally in the wrong? Did Jesus *sin* against this woman here, and it is as simple as that? That does allow reading this right at face value. But it also is theologically about as problematic as anything can be in the Christian faith.

This is so first, because a sinful Jesus being part of the Trinitarian Godhead means a sinful God⁴, which is impossible to reconcile with either the Jewish faith or the Christian one which arose out of it. We understand Jesus to be what God acts like in the flesh. God's perfect righteousness is tossed out the window if God, when in our shoes, acts just like the rest of us.

Second, we understand Jesus's place and role partly as the expression of God's love to the world. This is in question if it turns out that he isn't entirely doing that.

Third, the depiction of Jesus as sinless, carrying our sin but none of his own, is inextricable from scripture. Christ is depicted as a "lamb without defect or blemish,"⁵ and this theological notion of a

³ Genesis 12:3b (NRSV).

⁴ Or means separating the divine and human natures of Jesus in a way in which they can actually be at odds with one another, which has most of the same theological problems described in the next few paragraphs.

⁵ 1 Peter 1:19 (NRSV).

blameless one absorbing all sin is pervasive, hearkening back to much earlier Jewish animal sacrifice, carrying on into the Messianic prophetic texts, and directly stated in the theological writings of the Gospels, epistles, and Revelation, many of which tie Jesus openly to that earlier Messianic prophecy. 1 Peter points back to Isaiah when it says of Jesus, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”⁶ 1 John tells us “in him there is no sin,”⁷ and the book of Hebrews testifies of Jesus, “[W]e do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”⁸ If we see scripture as essentially testifying truthfully to the nature and identity of Jesus Christ, we are going to have a hard time believing in a sinful Jesus.

What is left? There is the possibility that Jesus was not sinful, but merely ignorant of the fact that his full mission included the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Scriptures do indicate some things of which Jesus claims to be ignorant himself, such as the time of his second coming.⁹ Luke’s one-sentence summary of Jesus’s entire youth and early adulthood contains the declaration, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years,”¹⁰ and increasing in wisdom can only mean not having all wisdom to begin with. So seeing a Jesus who comes to understand new things is not by any means automatically unbiblical.

And that may be a fully viable interpretive direction to take this. It still is a difficult one, though, because the idea that he would be this clueless about one of the fundamental planks of his mission is hard to square with the idea that Jesus was correctly and adequately carrying it out. That is, this interaction would not seem to fit a Jesus who lives in total conformity to the will of the Father, something he does claim to do in John 8, where he claims, “[T]he one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.”¹¹ Incomplete knowledge is one thing, but ignorant racial prejudice seems hard to describe as “doing what is pleasing to [God].”

Unless, I suppose, we consider the possibility that God the *Father’s* mind was changed by this interaction as well; that God was perfectly pleased with calling the Gentiles dogs until this moment. I include this interpretive option for the sake of completeness, but it doesn’t work very well. If God’s mind was legitimately changed here, then logically it must mean either that caring for foreigners isn’t truly a matter of justice, or that God was unjust at the start of the story.

What does that leave us with? Some people have suggested Jesus is testing her, but this is an odd thing. Why would Jesus give away healings constantly to Jewish people, but require passing some kind of riddle test before healing this foreign girl?

One thing that has always struck me about this passage¹² is that the interaction takes the form of 1) Challenge; 2) Response refuting the challenge; and 3) Immediate affirmation that the correct response was given. Is this a teaching technique? It certainly looks like one. He didn’t just heal her and then move on, letting his doing so get lost in the noise. He stopped and fed her the line that would be expected from someone in his position with all the common prejudices of the day, setting up a response that challenges the treatment he had just declared was the only fair thing to do.

⁶ See 1 Peter 1:19 and Isaiah 53:9.

⁷ From 1 John 3:5 (NRSV).

⁸ Hebrews 4:14-15 (NRSV).

⁹ See Mark 13 and Matthew 24.

¹⁰ Luke 2:52a (NRSV).

¹¹ John 8:29 (NRSV).

¹² And even more so its equivalent in Matthew.

You don't even have to think Jesus knew exactly what she was going to say to recognize that this is the outcome of the conversation. Echoing a common way of looking at things, saying it out loud, thus creating the stage for her to rebut the prevailing wisdom directly is powerful. It does three things clearly:

One, it turns what might have been an unnoticed action into a demonstrative lesson. It demonstrates God's grace, care, and love extended outside of the Jewish people. It demonstrates moreover that people outside can and do have true faith, and obtain faith's rewards—her coming to him in faith for healing turns out no differently than Jews coming to him in faith for healing.¹³

Two, it does something very intriguing by allowing Jesus to be corrected: it uses the *woman's* voice to establish and demonstrate the lesson. For she is not the one being taught. The students are the people watching from the sidelines. The Syrophenician woman is being put in the position of the one teaching. To everyone present—and we shouldn't miss noticing this—she is made in that moment a preacher! Simply granting her request might have been read as “shutting her up by doing what she wanted.” Instead, he does the opposite; he unmutes her. Her voice is what carries the day.

There is a third thing being done here, as well. You might notice something odd, which is that the conversation never gets around to contesting the use of the term “dogs” to describe her people. The woman doesn't even challenge the insult. But her choice is ultimately more challenging to the mindset *behind* the insult. She doesn't fight back and create the opportunity for a distracting fight over people's sense of superiority. Instead, she simply absorbs their hostile description of her without showing offense. She uses the word herself, thereby zooming past the insult without even really acknowledging it as one, and instead she dives at the question at the core of it all: Is the foreigner fed the same bread as they are fed, included in the blessings of the same God?

When Jesus then answers, “Yes,” this creates a much deeper crack in the foundation of partiality. Whether she is a “child” or a “dog” isn't the argument because it isn't allowed to matter anymore. You can't set limits anymore around who gets love and care from you and from God by drawing a boundary line and labeling one set of people as your circle of friends; no, we're dealing with a Christ who demands, even more directly elsewhere, that you love even your enemies and see to their needs also. Whatever they *call* this woman, they can no longer exclude her.

Which takes us right back to where we started. “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” James asks us that, and he doesn't ask it for no reason. He asks it because the Jesus he knows and follows is one who has banished partiality and favoritism. This Jesus went off to a distant place, affirmed a foreign woman in her proclamation that God could be her God, too, and then emphasized the point by immediately going to another non-Jewish place and healing a man there also.

So are these people given only the “crumbs” that fall from the table? I don't know. But this episode comes from Mark 7. Do you know what happens one chapter earlier, in Mark 6? Jesus takes five loaves of bread and two fish and with it feeds five thousand—and has twelve baskets left over, far more crumbs left at the end than there was food of any kind at the start. That is the God we proclaim, one of abundance, whose mercy and justice extend further than any border we can draw.

¹³ It might further be worth mentioning that even most of *those* people are outsiders as well—lepers, sinners, tax collectors, the woman with the flow of blood, and so on.

We have spoken of God's care for the foreigner, and we have heard today also that faith without works is dead. If you have at all kept abreast of the ongoing, massive refugee crisis coming largely out of the Syrian civil war and the brutal territorial expansion of ISIS, then it is clear that today's scriptural themes speak directly to the news of the day. We have seen our habitual way of life, where we so easily believe that all the bread on our table is for us and for our own, proven false in the story of Jesus, this Syrophenician woman, and all the foreigners to whom he went on afterward. And surely if God cares for the foreigner in the foreign land, then God's care is all the more for those who cannot safely remain in their land at all, those who are right now taking any risk to escape to another place in search of a crumb left over. Do we have any to offer? May God give us the courage and faithfulness to hear the challenge of James, and to be like Jesus, drawing no lines around who are the sort of people who receive our works of faith. Amen.

The Charge:

I have an extended charge to you today: We have spoken of crumbs left over, and we have spoken of the foreigner in desperate need. Did you know we are actually commanded to have leftovers to give? Leviticus 23:22 says, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God." Where are the extra gleanings, the last little bits, that we have lying around? Do we hoard them and carefully husband them, down to the last penny? Do we waste them, draining the last dregs of our monthly budgets on silly ways of spending more than necessary, pointless things and unnecessary little conveniences eating up the grain at the edges of our fields?

Here is your charge: Think carefully on this. Pray about it. Some of us have whole loaves at the edges of our fields, some of us only have crumbs. But know where those loaves or crumbs are, and let them find the poor and the alien for whom they are meant.

The Benediction:

And here is your benediction: May God also provide abundantly for you. May your home be safe, and may your table overflow with bread and water, peace and laughter, now and always. Amen.