

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
Sermon for Sunday, September 6, 2009  
Rev. Daniel Burhop, Vacancy Pastor

Last week's Gospel Reading was a hard one to hear. To be told that it is not what is outside of us that makes us unclean and our works worthless, but that it is what comes out of our hearts that makes us unholy and sinful, is not an easy thing to hear. It doesn't make us feel great about ourselves, and that is kind of the point.

Left on it's own, the reading did not have much Gospel to it; just a harsh teaching of the law. Left on it's own we would go away like the rich young man after Jesus tells him that he must go and sell everything he has and follow Jesus if he wishes to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, after asking what it is that he must do to receive it. If that's the way we ask the question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The answer is simple: Be sinless. But who can do that? "If you fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted of the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it..." (James 2). That's what James says. If you keep the Law perfect, good for you. But you don't. So where do you go?

"From there Jesus arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon..." That's how the Gospel continues. You have to read on. Hear, in today's Gospel, we see the love, the mercy, the grace, the compassion of Jesus come out. Thank the Lord that the Holy Spirit inspired Mark to put this account next, because here is where we see the Gospel... but not a first.

Jesus goes away, tries to hide Himself, but this woman, this Gentile, this Syrophenician, comes to Him. She begs Jesus to help her. Her daughter is possessed by a demon. Jesus seems to refuse her. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Mark actually makes Jesus seem more polite than He really was. Matthew's account makes it even more alarming:

A Canaanite woman...came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Most of us would have left at that point. If we did stay, we would have said, "how dare you say that of me, Jesus. You are supposed to be compassionate, loving, caring." But she reacts differently. "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's

crumbs.” She doesn’t leave and go away; she doesn’t say, “how dare you.” She simply says, “you are right.” She gets it. She is one who understands what Jesus was saying in last week’s Gospel.

Yes Lord, I am what you say I am. I am a dog. I am a sinner. That doesn’t change who you are. Even the crumbs of the one who is the Living Bread from Heaven are good enough for me.

At this point, Jesus cannot hide His compassion and love any longer. “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” Matthew records His other words to her, “O woman, great is your faith!”

Great is your faith. Her faith in Jesus love was so deep that His words of Law didn’t change her view of Him. Her faith wasn’t great because of her, it was great because of the object of that faith; our Lord Jesus Christ. She came because she believed He was the Messiah. “O Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Kyrie, Eleison. She asks for the crumbs of God’s grace, and those crumbs of compassion bring life to her daughter.

The compassion and mercy of Jesus continues in our reading. Jesus departed from that place and went to Galilee. There, a man was brought to Him that was deaf and had a speech impediment. Here we see again the true nature of Jesus. The way that Jesus conducts this miracle seems strange at first, until you think about what it is like to be deaf and in a crowd. Jesus takes the man away from the crowd, just the two of them. The man had to know that what Jesus was doing was not for anyone else, but just for him. Jesus puts His fingers into the man’s ears, spits and touches his tongue, looks up to heaven and sighs and says to him “Ephphatha,” which means “Be opened.” The man’s ears are opened, his tongue is released and he speaks perfectly.

What Jesus had done figuratively for the woman, opening His kingdom to her although she was not one of the House of Israel, He does literally for this man, opening his ears to hear and his mouth to proclaim.

This is what Jesus does. He takes the things that we have turned upside down with our sin, and puts them right side up. He brings all people into His Kingdom. He fulfills what was written in Isaiah, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.” He restores creation to its perfection.

He does the same for you. Yes, your works are worthless. You are dead in your trespasses, so far gone that you cannot even hear correctly. Out of your heart comes all sorts of sin, “evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.” All of these things, Jesus said, come from within you and defile you.

Yet while your works are worthless, Jesus counts you as priceless. That’s what last week’s sermon was all about. He gives up all to come to you. He speaks His word and

opens your heart and creates faith in you. He opens your ears to hear His Word. He opens your tongue to say along with the woman, “yes, I am a dog, but You are the Christ.” He opens your mouth to feast on the crumbs of that Living Bread from Heaven, the flesh and blood of Christ, that give you eternal life. He comes to restore creation from the fall. He comes to save you.

“Ephphatha”...that could be the subtitle of the Life of Christ. He came to open heaven for you. He walked into the waters of the Jordan and the Heavens were opened. He dies on the cross, canceling out the debt of your sin, and the temple curtain is opened. He baptizes you “in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost” and opens your heart and your ears and your mouth.

We don't do it any more in the baptismal rite, but at the time of the Reformation, Luther put together a baptismal rite that retained a few of the practices of the early church. One was that the pastor would touch the ears and the tongue of the one being baptized. In your baptism, Jesus opens our ears to hear and our tongues to confess that He is Lord. As one of my old professors has, perhaps crudely, said, “Baptism is Divine Spittle.”

With your baptism, Jesus does for you spiritually what He did for the deaf and mute man physically. He also does for you what He did for the woman, bringing you into His family and giving you a place at the table to eat of His Bread.

All of this He does, only out of divine goodness and mercy; without any merit or worthiness in you. All of this comes from outside of you, opening your ears to hear and your tongue to confess that Jesus is Lord. All of this is what gives you peace.