

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“A Dose of Discernment”
Psalm 125:1-5
Mark 7:24-30**

**Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 9, 2018**

Psalm 125:1-5

A Song of Ascents.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore. For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong. Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts! But those who turn aside to their crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers! Peace be upon Israel!

Mark 7:24-30

And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

"A Dose of Discernment"

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What an intriguing encounter with Jesus Christ. I've heard stories of people encountering their favorite celebrities in public, but end up being disappointed. The actor who plays the lovable character is a real-life jerk. The musician who sings of being chill and loose is actually a hot-head and paranoid. The athlete who is confident on the field is arrogant on the streets. Here we have a situation that, initially, looks like one of these disappointing encounters.

One of the things we have to remember is that Jesus was a lot like a celebrity. What we call his three-year ministry around Galilee, some might call a three-year tour. Jesus was well known, and we have examples of the many times he was surrounded by crowds. In fact, the story of Jesus walking on the water occurs because he tells his disciples to go on ahead while he disperses the crowd. The same thing has happened in our story this morning. Earlier in chapter six, Jesus is seen having a debate with the Scribes and Pharisees, then he addresses the gathering crowd. All this notoriety can take a toll on a person, but moreover, Jesus had just defeated the Pharisees and it wasn't quite yet time for his passion to occur, so he removed himself for a little while from Galilee.

Just like famous people today are known the world over, Jesus, too, was known to some degree outside of the borders of Israel. Mark tells us that Jesus went for a weekend retreat in the region of Tyre and Sidon. If you're curious where that is, you can find a map on page 1092 of your pew Bible. Tyre and Sidon are two coastal cities in the in region of Phoenicia, which is a province of

the Kingdom of Syria. This area was deeply Gentile. Even at the height of the united monarchy, under King Solomon, the area of Phoenicia remained outside of Israel's borders. As far as the average person in Jesus' time was concerned, the Syrophenicians were pure Gentiles. This made that region the perfect place for Jesus to get away from the inquisitive crowds and the maddening Pharisees.

And yet, even in one of the oldest, staunchest Gentile areas, Jesus "could not be hidden." The Evangelist tells us that almost immediately upon kicking his shoes off and plopping on the couch, Jesus is interrupted by some woman. Right as he's getting comfortable, she comes in, drops to his feet, and starts telling him about some demon that's possessed her daughter. You see, even in this Gentile world, some hint of Jesus' power was made known. Calvin ascribes this glimmer of wisdom to the Holy Ghost. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus tells him that the Spirit, like the wind, goes where it wills. The Holy Spirit is not bound to our conceptions nor by our preconceived notions. Just because this woman was not of the house and lineage of Israel does not mean God can't and won't reveal himself to her.

Now, we have to be careful about applying this revelation to our times. At this point in history, Jesus is in the *process* of revealing himself, but the fullness of his Messiahship has yet to be made known. Today, however, we have the full revelation of the Gospel. We know that Jesus is the Messiah, and as God's true Son and Heir, salvation is only found through him. This means, today, the glory of God—the true gift of salvation—is only revealed through the Gospel of Jesus Christ and nowhere else. In this peculiar circumstance in Jesus' ministry, it is right and logical for God to reveal to this Gentile a glimmer of the Christ.

Now that we have a background for this meeting, I want to take the time to look at her conversation with Jesus. This is where I said the encounter could potentially lead to disappointment. This Gentile woman begs Jesus to exorcise the demon in her daughter. She's clearly aware that Jesus has the power to heal and to cast out demons. This region of Syria is known to have traded with the people of Galilee, so it's very likely she heard the stories of his miracles from traveling merchants. There's a hopefulness in her that this Healer could help her daughter. To her surprise, and to mine as well, Jesus tells her "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." You can imagine the woman's shock at this thinly veiled insult. Not only does he openly deny her request, but he calls her a dog on top of that.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that I appreciate and turn to Calvin in my own theological processing. But what may be surprising to some of you is that I don't always agree with him. In his commentary on this passage, I find something outrageous in his interpretation. You see, Calvin always has to think of Jesus in a positive light. He can't imagine Jesus, at all, acting with human passions. In this moment, what Calvin says, is that outwardly Jesus denies this woman's request, and even insults her as a test to her faith. But—and this is where I think Calvin is off—he telepathically encouraged her to press on. I quote, "But since there are two ways in which Christ speaks and is silent, we must note that although He then suppressed His words, He spoke inwardly to the woman's mind and so this secret instinct stood in place of the external preaching."¹ While it is true that Jesus' divinity is able to perceive people's thoughts (see Mt. 9:4, 12:25, Mk. 2:8, Lk. 5:22), I don't think Jesus went around implanting thoughts into people's minds. Come on, Calvin...

What I think happened is Jesus had a human moment. We believe that he is both fully human and fully divine, two natures in one person, distinct, unmingled, yet equally present. Jesus' divinity knew she was telling the truth, that I have no doubt. And Jesus' humanity was just exhausted. Sometimes, especially after a long day of interacting with people, I just want to be left alone. It doesn't have to be long; forty-five minutes, an hour. Our Lord didn't even have a chance to relax before he was interrupted by this Gentile. What I see happening here is both natures manifesting themselves. Jesus, as God, knew he could not refuse someone who was truly in need. That would go against his nature. Jesus, as man, knew he was tired, and knew it wasn't yet time to reveal himself fully to the Gentiles. Instead of flatly denying this woman, he chides her with sharp, yet accurate theology.

Out of his infinite and unknowable wisdom, God saw it fit to adopt the children of Israel as holders of his covenant with the human race. In this way and in his own time, God would reveal himself to the Patriarchs, the Judges, the Kings, the Prophets, and ultimately in the Messiah himself. Because of this, Jesus is correct to say, "Let the children be fed first." By this, Jesus essentially says, "It's clear you know something about me, but the fullness of my revelation is not yet come. The Lord's Supper is not yet served to the Children. To feed the dogs before the Children would be inappropriate and untimely." Is Jesus insulting her? Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps he is, indeed, as Calvin suggests, testing her? Regardless, the woman's response clearly contains a dose of discernment.

Somehow she had heard of this Jesus the Nazarene, and now this Judean Prophet was in her neighborhood. To turn to a Hebrew prophet was likely the last option she had. I imagine she visited countless Syrophenician prophets and priests, to no avail. "If he is so close," she may have thought, "then this must be a sign and it's the very last thing I can try." His response to her pleading would've sent away the average person. Dejected and disappointed, she could've returned to her demon-possessed daughter. But she was no average Gentile. She had, whether perceived by her or not, a tiny seed of faith within her. She knew she needed to persevere. This is her last chance of healing her daughter, so she must not give up. And this is where the discernment comes in. She knew she couldn't leave, but she also knew she shouldn't press her luck. If that encounter were to happen today, the woman would've called Jesus a sexist misogynist for refusing to help her and proceed to sue him for all his worth. Overreaction is just as detrimental as underreaction. And so she responds with a truly clever, thoughtful, and powerful retort.

"Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." By calling him Lord, we see that she has some recognition as to who Jesus is. She also recognizes that the dogs, whether or not as an insult, can also benefit from God's grace. As the Psalmist says, "my cup runneth over." She knew the blessings of God could not be confined forever. She recognized that God's grace can't and won't be limited to the Hebrew race. The benefits of communion with Christ can and will be shared beyond the borders of Judea. Maybe she lived to hear the preaching of the Apostles. But for the time being, all she knew was that God cannot be contained. *This Jesus, whoever he is, will give me a taste of his grace.* And in reward for both her perseverance and her discerning wit, Jesus grants her request and her daughter is made whole.

Truth be told, we can use this passage to support any number of theories and doctrines. Narrowing this passage to a mere proof text, however, is a severe injustice. To get a full measure of this encounter, we must observe the context in which this story takes place. We find our clue in the passages immediately before ours. The Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus by drawing up a strawman argument that says he and his disciples are hypocrites for eating with defiled hands. Jesus is quick to turn the question on them and points out their own hypocrisy. He then calls the rest of the crowd and gives them this wonderful gem. He says, “Whatever goes into a person from the outside cannot defile him...What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, *out of the heart* of man, come evil things.” In this one teaching moment, Jesus turns the whole paradigm of cleanliness on its head.

Our passage follows right on the heels of this conversation, and both this story and the next one about Jesus spitting into a deaf man’s ears are meant to be viewed in the light of a new understanding on cleanliness. The outside appearances and outside situations of a person do not constitute his or her cleanliness. Or as we’d say today, it’s not how a person looks or what station in life that determines her salvation. You see, both the Gentile woman and the deaf man were considered ritually unclean and outside of the realm of God’s grace. And the fact that Jesus and his disciples were interacting with unclean folks made them equally defiled in the eyes of the Scribes and Pharisees.

The real thrust of these two stories is not about gender or disability. No, these stories are missional stories. The Gospel message and the evangelical Christian—when I say evangelical I mean Gospel-oriented Christian—are supposed to be outwardly focused. We ought to be evangelical in the sense that the Gospel ought to be deeply rooted in our hearts and always on our lips. Remember what Jesus taught, what comes out of the heart is what reveals if a person is defiled or honorable. The Syrophenician woman and the deaf man may have been outwardly different, socially unacceptable, but inwardly and before God, their hearts were pure and honorable. While the Pharisees, who outwardly were righteous, were inwardly corrupt and crooked. True and zealous Christians share the Gospel with those on the margins. Not only that, they meet them where they are and are not afraid to interact with those whom society says are unworthy. We can’t sit here and wait for people to walk into our doors. We have been blessed in that regard, but we cannot sit on our hands. In the end, Jesus did not shy away from helping the outsiders he encountered. So I ask you, church, have you shared the Gospel with someone on the margins? How might we benefit from a dose of holy discernment? Are we reaching out to share not only a hand of compassion but also the life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Let us pray. Holy God, Wonderful Counselor, we know that far too often we do not follow your command to preach the Gospel. We as a denomination, we as a presbytery, and we as a congregation miss your mark. Forgive us. Turn us away from complacency to zealotry. May we be disciples not only in head but in heart as well. And may we bear the good fruit of our regeneration through Christ Jesus. In his holy and precious name, we pray. Amen.

¹ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospel, Vol. II*, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI, 1972. Page 168.