Good afternoon! My name is Ginny Banister, and I am currently doing my capstone internship here in Richmond Va. @ Christ the King Lutheran Church and being supervised by Pastor Randy Lohr. I am preaching on the gospel of Mark chapter 7, vs. 24-37 on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, lectionary 23 year B

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

We are told in this text that Jesus is tired and seeking some time away from the crowds that continually follow him. He’s become well known for his healing power. He heads off into an “impure” territory – Tyre – which is a gentile region. He enters a house and didn’t want anyone to know he was there. But apparently, even in this gentile region, word has spread. And as far as Gospel stories go, this one is a bit odd. Why is Jesus in Tyre of all places? So far from Galilee both in mileage and cultural differences. Why is he alone? Or was he alone? Matthew’s gospel says the disciples were with him, Mark doesn’t mention them. So many things just don’t add up.

Now we have a woman in the picture. She found this “miracle man” called Jesus. Her daughter is struggling with some sort of demon. We aren’t told what but it’s serious enough for a woman, a complete stranger, to seek Jesus out. She breaks every traditional barrier that should prevent her from getting to him. First, she’s a woman – traveling alone unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, she is implicitly impure as one who lives outside of the land of Israel and the laws of Moses AND she’s a Gentile of Syrophoenician origin. All BIG taboos. Anyway, you look at it this woman is an outsider.

So, she finds Jesus and tells her story. Jesus is a little slow to help. In fact, he’s rather insulting. He says, “let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” The “children” in this statement are the children of Israel. Matthew tells of this story as well and says Jesus begins by saying “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24) How could he say such a thing? Some interpreters propose that Jesus is testing the woman – to see if she has faith. Others say this is where we see a very human side of Jesus, who is exhausted and needing a break. Think about it, Jesus got mad, he turned tables in the temple, Jesus cried, Jesus was afraid – remember when Jesus says “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me?” So, why wouldn’t he be bothered when he is exhausted and I like to say a little fussy? He was truly divine AND truly human.

The woman then proceeds to say very directly “Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” All she is asking for is a few crumbs. It’s not like she’s asking for a seat at the table. Perhaps here, Jesus realizes God’s love has no ethnic, political, or social boundaries.

The challenge of Mark’s gospel is to embrace a God who is active and does not conform to the norms of human society.

So how does this part of the text relate to us in today’s world? Perhaps we should ask “who are the marginalized voices today who may be speaking truth to power? Do we dare to look beyond our immediate task at hand to do the right thing – regardless of race, gender, political or religious differences?

Think of where we are today? Many Afghans are seeking refuge in our country due to the atrocities that they were witnessing. Are we welcoming them with open arms? Are we afraid of them? Afterall, they aren’t “our kind” …….is God testing us? A thought to ponder.

Do we invite all to the table? Because the table belongs to everyone. God seats us at the table and claims all of us as God’s children. Children from every tribe, language, and nation.

I would dare to say, we are getting there but we have a long way to go.

Further in the text, Mark tells us Jesus left Tyre and went through Sidon down to the sea of Galilee and into the region of Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was both deaf and could hardly talk. They begged him to place his hand on the man.

Jesus took the man aside, away from the crowd, and put his fingers in the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue, looked to heaven and with a deep sigh said Ephphatha! Which means “be opened.” At these words the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak and hear.

Now we don’t really know what this deaf/mute man was thinking but it seems that Jesus has a certain “gentleness” with him. He takes him away from the crowd – why? We don’t know but perhaps so as not to overwhelm him when he does begin to hear and speak clearly? Makes sense.

But what is the meaning of spitting in this healing. As I researched this, I discovered that saliva, in Jesus’ day, represented healing powers. Perhaps Jesus was doing this just to affirm people’s convictions. There are only 3 instances in the Gospels where Jesus used spit to heal. Here, in this story, then again in Mark 8 and in John 9. Both of these had to do with Jesus spitting so a blind man could see. Otherwise, he simply touched a person, or healed from a far (like the woman’s daughter in this text) or someone simply touched is garment. Jesus didn’t need “props” to heal.

This entire text is rather difficult to unpack. One could actually create several sermons form it. Details are vague to say the least. We see some strong intentionality from the woman asking for her daughter to be healed. Surely, if she broke so many boundaries to get to Jesus, she certainly had faith he could do it. However, we know nothing of the man with the speech and hearing issues. Only that others brought him to Jesus because THEY had faith Jesus could heal. Perhaps the man did as well. But again, as like much of this text, we really don’t know. This reminds me of the power in intercessory prayer. I give thanks to those here at Christ the King who meet monthly for intercessory prayer for those both within and outside of our congregation. God hears ALL prayers.

Lastly, Jesus tells others not to speak of what he has done. How often does he ask this? Many, many times. But no one ever listens. They are so excited and overwhelmed at his healing powers they cannot contain it! I suppose Jesus didn’t want to be known for just his healing powers, however great. But Jesus wanted to reach people both in that way and through his teachings and his relationship with the Triune God.

Yes, Jesus was tired. Just like we are at times. He may have been a little fussy in the beginning of this text. But he did it anyway! And he kept on doing it.

Why? Because that’s what he was called to do.

A good reminder of what we are called to do. Pray for others, be persistent and yet humble with God. Go on faith, not assumption. And lastly, know that healing takes many forms. A hardened heart, a weary spirit, loneliness, and isolation – which has been plentiful in this period of the pandemic. Never take for granted that bringing others to Jesus for healing isn’t a powerful act. As a mother, a friend, or an intercessory prayer group.

All are paths to God’s gracious healing power. Thanks be to God.

Amen