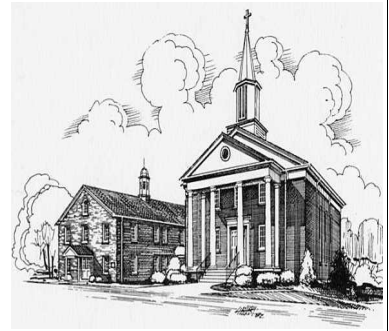


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to September 7

Proper 18

Year B

RCL



Isaiah 35:4-7a

Psalms 125

Mark 7:24-37

The Collect

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts;
for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their
own strength, so you never forsake those who make
their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our
Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spir-
it, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

“Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,

and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,

and the thirsty ground springs of water.

Psalm 125, Page 781, BCP

Qui confidunt

- 1 Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but stands fast for ever.
- 2 The hills stand about Jerusalem;
so does the LORD stand round about his people,
from this time forth for evermore.
- 3 The scepter of the wicked shall not hold sway over the land allotted to the just,
so that the just shall not put their hands to evil.
- 4 Show your goodness, O LORD, to those who are good
and to those who are true of heart.
- 5 As for those who turn aside to crooked ways,
the LORD will lead them away with the evildoers;
but peace be upon Israel.

Mark 7:24-37

Jesus 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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

SERMON

I dread this passage from Mark when it comes around every three years.

... a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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."

How in the world am I supposed to preach the Good News from such a passage? I spent a good deal of time wandering through the various apologetics to find a convincing way to present Jesus' words to you as other than their plain meaning. I emerged unconvinced. You and I like dogs. First Century Jews considered dogs unclean and defiled. Jesus was insulting this mother who asked for healing for her daughter and I don't know of

any way to present it to you as anything else and still retain my integrity. We've heard all our lives that Jesus never did a negative thing. This is a very difficult passage to square with the notion that Jesus never did anything negative.

Our resistance to hearing the plain words in this account focuses our attention on a contemporary illness which I would maintain is slowly killing our churches. It might be called “Comfortable Christianity”, and it consists of a faith cobbled together from favorite hymns, pleasant childhood memories and soothing assurances, but which refuses to engage the full meaning of the confession that the Word of God became flesh in Jesus. Comfortable Christianity turns Christ into a sort of superhero and God into a sort of score keeper. Comfortable Christianity substitutes opposition to others for love of neighbor, and insists that the Good News is

merely a business transaction whereby those who go to the right church and confess the right set of beliefs are rewarded in heaven, and those who don't — get what's coming to them. No mention of these words from the Letter of James.

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 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?

What is lacking today, it seems to me, is a thirst for a more intimate faith. It was not always so. There were times when it was vitally important to know what you thought about Jesus, not merely that you believe in some fashion that there once was a man named Jesus. People in times past struggled with who Jesus was, and how they were to relate to him. Forgive me, but that fire seems to have burned low today. We actually seem to

think we have Jesus figured out, and so have no appetite for the meal Jesus offers, no thirst for the true drink from the cup of Salvation.

There was an important meeting some time ago, which took up these questions about Jesus. It was by invitation only, and you weren't invited. Also, it took place in the year 451, so you shouldn't feel bad about not being invited. The Patriarch of Constantinople presided over some 500 bishops who took on the question of who this Jesus was. Was Jesus a divine being sent from heaven who only appeared to have a human body? Was He a normal human being who had been adopted at His baptism and filled with the Spirit of God? After much prayer and discussion, they taught:

... men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a [rational] soul and body;

consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin;

The Comfortable Christian protests, “Jesus was the Son of God, and He was perfect, and that’s all I need to know.” That isn’t all you need to know at all. If Jesus, as we have been taught by well-meaning people all our lives, lived in perfect communion with God, how can He say these offensive words to the woman with a sick child who is appealing to Him? Isn’t Jesus the perfect expression of God’s will?

Answering that question required another meeting you weren’t invited to. It happened 230 years later, in the year 681. It had been suggested that if Jesus must be viewed as truly God and truly man maybe Jesus had only one divine-human energy which motivated Him. Or maybe Jesus had only one will, (that is, that there

was no opposition in Christ between His human and His divine volition). After much prayer and discussion, the bishops affirmed that Jesus had “two natural wills and two natural energies, without division, alteration, separation or confusion.”

Human Jesus, with a will and an energy of his own, was a man of his time, just as each of us are. Jewish Jesus naturally viewed his calling to be to God’s chosen, and he said as much.

He said to her, “Let the children [of Israel] be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s [of Israel’s] food and throw it to the dogs [who are Gentiles].”

That’s jarring. I am not telling you that Jesus was not perfect. I am telling you that applying words like “perfect” to Jesus will get you in trouble. You can only judge perfection if you know what perfection is, and you don’t. None of us do. We’re fallible, sinful human

beings. We are not qualified to judge perfection. When we say Jesus was perfect, what we're really doing is convincing ourselves that we know something we don't know — what a perfect Son of God would look like.

Be glad of that, church! Jesus is the perfect Savior precisely because there is no challenge to your commitment to live into the Gospel that Jesus did not also endure, for Jesus was fully God and fully human. There is no mountain you must climb that Jesus didn't first struggle with for Jesus had two energies and two wills, not one. What happens next shows us this clearly for this woman called Jesus out over His words, and actually bested Him in argument.

But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Jesus immediately acknowledged that she was correct.

Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may

go – the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

I was arguing with a fellow once who had said an offensive thing about African-Americans, and I asked him if he thought Jesus would do such a thing. He responded, “Well, he’s Jesus. I’m not that good.” That’s the point! Jesus struggled with the same things we struggle with! And when Jesus was corrected by this woman, He acknowledged it, and granted her wish, healing her daughter, even from a distance. We do not go through life alone. We are accompanied by a God who has walked our walk and talked our talk. We share our grief, not with a distant, unapproachable God but with Jesus who suffered the dark night at Gethsemane, who cried out from the cross of his agony, “My God, my God! Why hast thou forsaken me?” These ancient Bishops

recognized that we would truly be without hope if Jesus were either only human or only divine. Because Jesus is fully human we have confidence that God has entered into existence with us. Because Jesus is fully human, we have confidence that God truly understands us and loves us¹.

I rather think that I have surprised and shocked you this Sunday. I rather think that you've never heard a preacher say that Jesus could react as a man of His time, and that my saying it makes you uncomfortable. I can't apologize for that. There can be no growth without change, and there can be no change without discomfort. We don't gather here each Sunday to be patted on the head, but to deepen our relationship with our God, and that entails struggle. God has prepared a table before us, groaning with the finest of food and drink. The

¹ <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/jesus/>

Comfortable Christian sits anxiously at the table and will eat only white bread because the food before him is strange to him and alarms him. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. It is a spring of very deep water. One who drinks from this spring will never be thirsty. Such a one will never be satisfied with a sip from the spring, but will drink his fill.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Archbishop Timothy Dolan once said:

“Maybe the greatest threat to the Church is not heresy, not dissent, not secularism, not even moral relativism, but this sanitized, feel-good, boutique, therapeutic spirituality, that makes no demands, calls for no sacrifice, asks for no conversion, entails no battle against sin, but only soothes and affirms.”

Our faith demands that we hear Jesus, even if it makes us uncomfortable, for without discomfort, there is unlikely to be change.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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