

Sunday closest to September 7

Proper 18

Year B

RCL



James 2:14-17

Psalm 146

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 Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Psalm 146

Lauda, anima mea

1 Hallelujah!

Praise the LORD, O my soul! *

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

2 Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, *
for there is no help in them.

3 When they breathe their last, they return to earth, *
and in that day their thoughts perish.

4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their
help! *

whose hope is in the LORD their God;

5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is
in them; *

who keeps his promise for ever;

6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, *
and food to those who hunger.

7 The LORD sets the prisoners free;

the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; *

the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

8 The LORD loves the righteous;
the LORD cares for the stranger; *
he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

9 The LORD shall reign for ever, *
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.
Hallelujah!

James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

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 Syrophenician 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.

SERMON

Every three years the Revised Common Lectionary lays this passage in my lap and demands that I do something uplifting with it. Every three years, my heart quails within me and I find reasons to do something else. This year, I even briefly toyed with the idea of mowing my own grass. Fortunately, that impulse died aborning.

The account of the Syrophoenician Woman and her desperately ill daughter grinds my gears. It upsets me. It makes me feel ungrounded, as the certainties I treasure about Jesus get ripped from under my feet. I thought I knew Jesus. This account condemns me where I stand for presuming to pass judgment on who Jesus is. I am in a deep hole, and clearly, the trifling thoughts which fill my head are not helping me to move past this great stone in the road, so this year I went looking for help. I

found it in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell, associate pastor for education and engagement at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. Like me, she is disturbed by this passage. Here's what she suggested:

To get things going, I want to start out with a quick little getyourimaginationgoing exercise. Now unless you are operating any sort of heavy machinery, I want you to just close your eyes wherever you may be, take a deep breath, clear your mind, and picture Jesus. Alright, do you have an image in your head? Great. You can open your eyes.

Now I just have a few follow up questions for you and I want you to keep count of how many questions you answer yes to.

In your imagined picture of Jesus...

- Did he have a full beard?**
- Was he wearing a white robe?**
- Did he have a calm, serene look on his face?**

- **Was he surrounded by children and/or cute farm animals (i.e. lambs, puppies, or kittens)?**
- **Were his arms outstretched or in some kind of a welcoming posture?**
- **Was he performing a miracle or doing some kind of charitable activity?**

My guess is that you said yes to at least three of those things. What I find so interesting is that even though we all have unique beliefs around and understandings of Jesus, our image of him is quite similar. It doesn't matter how many world famous artists have re-imagined and reinterpreted our Savior because when it comes down to it, most of us have gotten our picture of Jesus from the exact same place: the cover of a children's Bible. And it doesn't matter what version you have or edition you're using, Jesus always looks the same: calm, happy, and inviting.

Rev. Powell then notes that the Gospels are full of stories in which Jesus is sarcastic, reclusive, and even

grumpy. Be that as it may, this is where my gears get ground because I don't want a sarcastic, reclusive or grumpy Jesus; I want the one on the cover of the children's Bible. I want the Jesus who never has to struggle, who is inoffensive and dedicated to magically obtaining everything His followers need, exactly when they need it. Most of all, I want the Jesus who can save me without demanding anything from me, personally, beyond an affirmation of belief. I want an unchallenging, unchallenged and comfy Jesus, yet the Gospels of Mark and Matthew offer a very different Jesus in the story of the Syrophenician Woman. Oy veh iz mir!

Rev. Powell continues:

In the preceding chapters, Jesus had already performed a number of miracles including healing the sick and demon-possessed, walking on water, and feeding the 5,000. So by the time we encounter him in the Gentile region

of Tyre, there is no doubt that Jesus was exhausted and in need of some down time. And yet, he could not escape being noticed because a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit somehow finds out that he is in town, seeks Jesus out, bows down at his feet and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter. To which Jesus responds by saying, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

Now as much as I would like to say there is more to this comment than meets the eye, that crafty exegesis will uncover something unexpected about Jesus' shocking response, I can't. We can only speculate possible explanations as to why he was so dismissive, not the least of which is that Jesus was just being consistent about his intended mission. After all, the Gospels make clear that his ministry was to the Jews and as the text so plainly points out, the woman is a Gentile of Syro-Phoenician origin.

Here we are, poor mortals, stuck between the Gospel

and the cover of our well-loved children's Bible, between the magical divine Jesus we have been taught our entire lives, and the human Jesus who gets exhausted by the demands he bears. We are taught that Jesus is both fully human and fully God but only in rare passages are we blessed by accounts of the consequences of that statement. This is one such passage. In Jesus' sharp response we see the human Jesus, exhausted beyond description, struggling, just as do we, with the realities of being human. How could the serene children's Bible Jesus respond to me when I pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, son of God

Have mercy on me, a sinner

unless He, Himself, knew, first hand, how difficult it can be to follow the path set out for us? This is the Jesus who can come to me and say, "I know, my child! I know! Behold, I am with you always." This might not

be the Jesus I want, but this is the Jesus I need.

Rev. Powell continues:

I gotta be honest. I really struggled with this passage. It made me realize how attached I am to my domesticated, children's book version of Jesus.

- **The Jesus that bids everyone to come to him, no matter the time or the place.**
- **The Jesus that never tires or pulls away.**
- **The Jesus that doesn't have any tricks up his sleeve because what you see is what you get. And what you get are rainbows and sunshine.**

Yet, as I said earlier, Scripture paints a different picture of Jesus. One where he is indeed divine, yet also VERY human. This more realistic version of Jesus experiences the wide range of needs and emotions common to our species.

- **He gets annoyed with the stupidity of the disciples.**
- **He gets overwhelmed by the burden he is called to bear.**

• **He gets tired of having to be on all the time. So throughout the Gospels, we read how Jesus goes off by himself to pray, to recharge, to be alone with his Father. Except this time, he is unsuccessful. He gets cornered by a woman in need of help. So instead of encountering the “come-to-me-all-you-who-are-weary” Jesus, the Syrophenician woman confronts the “go-away-all-of-you-because-I’m-weary” Jesus.**

And since we are polite, well-mannered, 21st-century Christians, well, we don't really like this Jesus. We don't like that he doesn't just heal the woman's daughter when she asks. And we definitely don't like that he doesn't live up to our expectations of who we think Jesus should be.

Nothing that I've taught you this past dozen years is more important than this – Jesus was fully human and fully divine. When we recite that Christ took on flesh, we are not referring to the meaty part. We are referring to the difficult, self-defeating parts of humanity and we

are confessing that Jesus intentionally subjected Himself to these same temptations which form so much of our tragedy and sadness, and overcame them. We are speaking of a Jesus who has walked our walk and talked our talk and we know that Jesus sacrificed for all of us, those who occasionally succeed and those who occasionally fail. Treasure this passage, church. Treasure this view of Jesus' human nature and know the pain and difficulty He took on for your sake. Then, measure your response. Have you offered nothing more than affirmation of belief? What is your response to the sacrifice of Jesus?

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Today we prayed, “Patient Lord, you know us so well. We are fascinated by healing and can talk all day about the miracles, but we do not understand the compassion of Christ. We often say, ‘Just heal us; or Just make me rich; or Just make things go better at work’ or other such deals and then we promise our faithfulness and witness. But in our hearts, we just don’t get it.”

We don't. The burden of our humanity weighs us down, and Jesus knows, for Jesus experienced it. Jesus now has no hands but yours. Put the hands Jesus lent you to His work. It is not enough, by far, to receive. You are called to give.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to 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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It was written anonymously in Greek, for a gentile audience of Greek-speaking Christians. We know that because the author is careful to explain Jewish traditions and translate Aramaic terms for his audience. In the same way we have to do some explaining in order to properly understand Mark.