

Sermon on Mark 7:24-37
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 6, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Tomorrow is the first day of school for many children and youth. Some kids have already started classes. Many young people are going to a brand new school, which can be a pretty stressful experience. How many of you remember your first day at a new school? Was it stressful? Scary? Or fun? (*Turn to someone sitting near you and describe your first day of school – any year – with one word. You have 10 seconds each!*) How many used a word like scary or stressful? How many enjoyed their first day at a new school? Any other words?

At my daughter's school, North St. Paul high school, the new ninth graders are coming from over 50 different middle schools, which I think is amazing. Tomorrow, most kids won't know each other when they come to school, though some will. So who will they sit with at lunch? Will they sit only with their friends, and look for just those whom they know? What will the new kids see, when they enter the lunchroom for the first time? How will they be treated? You know, lunch is a pretty "segregated" time in the school day. Even though kids are divided up pretty well in the classroom, at lunch it seems that kids sit with those who look, dress, or act like them. Athletes sit with athletes, friends sit with friends, white kids sit with white kids and kids of color sit with kids of color. Maybe not by design, but for comfort – maybe we're just "programmed" that way – to see differences and try mostly to be with those most "like us". We're so used to this that Sunday morning worship is the "most segregated hour in America". It was 50 years ago when Martin Luther King Jr. first said this, and it's still true today. Just look at most of our churches; most of the people inside them look very much alike. But God would show us a much better way...

The epistle lesson and gospel today both explore the differences we humans see in each other, and how we treat others – by showing partiality, or including some and excluding others – in society and in the church. The point is, God our creator made us all – very different, but also equally loved by God. So if we follow God's intent in our lives, we will see the uniqueness and differences in one another as gifts of God. And we will treat one another with equal respect and hospitality, by not showing partiality, and loving our neighbors just as we love ourselves. So, how does this work out in the scripture lessons today?

The gospel today begins with Jesus entering the region of Tyre, where people of many cultures and religions lived. He had been doing a lot of teaching and healing and debating with people, and so Jesus entered a house where he hoped that he could escape notice, maybe even rest. But this was not to be.

It seems a woman nearby heard that Jesus had arrived, and she had a problem. Her daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, which no one could help her with, but she had heard that Jesus was a man of God, with power to heal. So she came to Jesus and bowed at his feet, and begged him to cast this demon out of her daughter. But there was another problem, it seems. This woman was a Gentile of Syrophenician origin – she was not a Jew, and there was no reason a male religious teacher should talk to her, according to their custom. So, what did Jesus say? We don't like what he said: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs!" (Meaning, I should heal my own people first – the people of Israel. You're not one of us, so I can't help you.) That's how most people understood things. If you were a Jew, you helped other Jews. If you were a Gentile, you helped others like you – you didn't cross ethnic or gender boundaries. Everyone understood this. It was the way things were. Jesus didn't have to explain anything at all.

Except that the woman did not accept his answer. She was totally focused on one thing: her daughter was sick, possessed by an unclean spirit. Jesus had the power to expel such spirits, and she was determined to ask him to do this for her. She wouldn't take such a lame response for an answer. She had a very clever response for Jesus: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." I bet Jesus laughed out loud, and maybe even told her "well said!" – but we don't know, because it's not in the gospel. What Mark did write down is this: "For saying this, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." So the woman went home and found her child lying on the bed, the demon gone. Jesus had crossed a great boundary of gender and ethnicity to heal this little girl – but not without the determined prodding of this woman. Is that what faith is? The courage not to accept the "way things are" and seek what you believe is God's way? And was Jesus just testing the woman by saying what he did, why he shouldn't help her, stating the facts about the situation? Did Jesus intend all along to help the woman and heal her child, but needed someone to speak the words challenging the way things were – people from one tribe or religion not helping those of another? Or did this woman's challenge and faith in his power to heal her daughter actually change what Jesus was going to do? Did Jesus change his mind because of the woman's words (like Abraham bargaining with God in the Old Testament to save some of the people of Sodom)? Are we humans able to move God...and move Jesus by our petitions and laments? Or is God always the same, is everything predetermined, and was Jesus infinite and all-knowing, crossing all our human boundaries from the beginning?

I don't know. (Sorry – are you looking for answers again, instead of just questions? Remember, knowledge is not just about knowing answers, but instead the ability to ask the right questions!) So you can argue either way. It's a great debate for people of faith! The crucial point of this story is that Jesus was

presented with a dilemma that we all face: someone (in this case, a child) was in need, and Jesus used his power to heal her. He needed to cross the boundary of ethnicity and religions to do it, but he did. And it took a woman who was not of his faith or ethnicity to point this out. Did she help move Jesus with her tenacity and faith? You be the judge!

But if you believe that Jesus, even God can be moved to a new way of thinking or acting, then how much more can we by faith be moved to new ways of thinking and acting ourselves?! Especially when it comes to how we think about other people, of other nations and faiths. Can you and I learn to love the immigrant from Africa or Asia, the Muslim from the Middle East, or the undocumented migrant worker from Mexico or Latin America; and treat our new neighbors with the same respect and justice that we seek for ourselves? Maybe that seems like a tall order, in this day and age when there is so much suspicion of Muslims when our nation is at war, and hatred of migrant workers because of our many fears. But we have to learn to do this in order to have peace, and to live together in this ever-shrinking world. And somebody has to take the lead: why not us Christians, whose leader – Jesus of Nazareth – was sent by God out of God’s love for the whole world to save us all from ourselves....who taught us by example to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But it starts right here, in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our churches, our schools, and in our workplaces. That’s where we so often fall short. In the book of James, our second lesson, the writer asks us “my brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” James is speaking more about economic favoritism – showing deference to the rich, making distinctions between rich and poor, and so dishonoring the poor, whom God also created (not to be poor, but as children of God!). On this Labor Day weekend, it is good to ask ourselves whether we in our attitudes, and in what we do as a nation and community with our policies and laws, do we act without partiality for all - rich, poor, or in between? For if we are all children of God, and so brothers and sisters in Christ, there should be no partiality at all in how we perceive or treat one another. This must certainly be so in our Church, in which we confess that “all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory”...but also that God has sent the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to save the whole world. If you and I believe this, we must then act on it. For “faith without works is dead” – and now we are alive in Christ Jesus. So despite all our many differences in appearances, in culture, in national origin, in income, or in gender or orientation, we are called by God through our baptism into Christ to love one another and treat every child with mercy and kindness. Sit with that new kid at the lunch table. Help that new employee struggling with a job. Invite a visitor to have a cup of coffee with you in the undercroft after church, or help them find the right page in the hymnal! Help change those policies and habits that keep some people excluded from good-paying

jobs in our community! When we do this, then the first day of school, or the first day someone visits us here in this church, can be a day of welcome, affirmation, and hope. Because it is through our hospitality and love, in word and deed for those who are most different from us, that the good news of the gospel shines through in this world of darkness. And it starts right here, in this place, with us. Thanks be to God! Amen.