

James 2:1-10, 14-17

¹My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴From there he 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, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Enough Bread to Go Around

My father grew up in rural Indiana, in a little town called Fremont, which is still a small town but must have been tiny back in my father's youth in the 30s. He grew up in what was a typical family back then having six siblings, five sisters and one brother. They were poor, but they were able to live off the land and the modest income his father earned as a traveling salesman, and they were churchgoers, which was also typical of a family back then. It was typical back then was for the local pastor to make surprise visits to members of his flock on a Sunday afternoon, usually in the early afternoon, around dinner time (some of you may still call your midday meal on Sundays "dinner"). I think this was to test the hospitality level of the congregation as well as providing the pastor and his wife with a free lunch. One Sunday afternoon Grandma Schaeffer (as she's known to me) looked out over the landscape and saw the pastor's vehicle heading in the direction of the Schaeffer home and quickly calculated that she had not prepared enough food to feed an additional two mouths, and being a rather clever woman she called my dad and his brother Ned aside and coached them on how they should perform during the Sunday dinner; as the chicken or potatoes or beans or bread was passed to them, they were to take none and pass it on, claiming to be "not hungry" (I suppose Grandma Schaeffer at some point had already instructed them that it was alright to lie if the occasion demanded it). Well the pastor and his wife arrived and after the usual niceties they all sat down to dinner, and my father and Uncle Ned performed flawlessly; when the concerned pastor inquired of them why they weren't taking any of delicious food they humbly and politely explained that they were not hungry. Thus they endured the entire main course, probably with mouths watering and stomachs growling, until the plates were cleared away, and Grandma Schaeffer emerged from the kitchen with fresh, warm homemade apple pie and announced that anyone who didn't eat their dinner would not be given any dessert.

Well my father and Uncle Ned did not suffer any permanent physical damage from malnutrition, though they may have had a hard time forgiving their mother for her little scheme that day. But all of us have experienced either not having enough to give everyone or feeling that we're not receiving enough. That experience is painfully clear in today's Gospel lesson. A woman has a daughter who is terribly sick and does not receive adequate help from Jesus, the great healer. Jesus explains to this desperate woman that he only has the resources to address the needs of the children of Israel, and unfortunately this woman is of the wrong lineage.

Once upon a time I made up excuses for Jesus for what he says to this Syrophenician woman in verse 27, but I've since learned to accept that there is no excuse. To imply that a little girl is a dog, regardless of her race or religion or color, is insulting, and no theological dance can sidestep this fact. In chapter 5 of Mark, a Jewish man, a ruler of the synagogue, comes to Jesus begging that Jesus heal *his* sick daughter, and Jesus goes right away. Why doesn't Jesus treat this foreign woman with equal regard? It can tarnish our image of Jesus as the Christ who is perfect-in-every-way, and has led many a reader to speculate that Jesus was simply prompting this woman go beyond simply begging and declaring her utter dependence upon the crumbs from Israel's table, but I would rather let the Bible inform my theology than let someone else's theology inform my understanding of the Bible. What Jesus said was bad. Whether it was a *sin* I'll withhold judgment. What I think happened was that this woman caused Jesus to change his tune, to open up his mission to the Gentiles, to understand his own mission as much broader

than he had previously imagined, *to recognize that God has put enough food on the table to feed everyone dinner, and even dessert!*

God's good intention is that his perfect love be expressed to all people. Last week's message was about love flowing from the heart of God. Today I follow up on that message with the idea that God's love flows infinitely out from the heart of God, and we can't limit it. If the thought of withholding God's healing from this woman's daughter because she was *dog* had crossed Jesus' mind, the Holy Spirit quickly intervened, prompting this woman to make one further plea to Jesus. That same Spirit tapped Jesus on the shoulder and said, "Yo Jesus, I like what you're doing, bringing the kingdom of God to Israel, but guess what? The kingdom of God covers a whole lot more territory than you think. Don't be stingy with this woman. There's plenty of bread to go around."

James is addressing the same issue in our Epistle lesson, but here it takes a much uglier turn. When people start to lose faith that God is the provider par excellence of all that we need and start to look to human beings as their providers, they tend to curry the favor of the richest human beings rather than on the poorest. And James makes the very stark observation that our actions reflect our faith or lack thereof. Our hearts are vessels of faith, and they are connected to our hands, so if we see someone who is in real need and we are not moved to act, how can we say that we have faith? To extend that argument, if we as a group fail to concern ourselves with the needs of the community and the world at large, how can we call ourselves a church? It takes more than stained glass and steeples, worship services and coffee hours to make a church. We are, quite truly, the hands and arms and legs and feet and neck and ...well ...we are the BODY of Jesus Christ – that's what Paul calls us, and that's how should be acting, like Jesus. Which is why our Gospel lesson is so encouraging today. Jesus had no problem ministering to the needs of his own people, healing their sick, giving to those in need among his own people, which is certainly acting in faith... faith in God of Israel. He could give of his time and money and energy to those in his community, but I'm wondering if his faith had limits once upon a time, and if a certain Syrophenician woman may have broadened that faith...faith in the power of a God who was not simply a God of the children of Israel but also a God of the Syrophenicians, a God of the Samaritans, a God of the Romans, a God of men and women and children, of all peoples. Jesus may have been narrow in his thinking, but he may have broadened his perspective that day in Tyre. And that means that we too can broaden our perspectives, we too can see that God has called us to minister to all people. And the trick isn't to set priorities on our giving; the trick is to always give as much as you can, and we can all improve in that area.