

**Yr. B, Proper 18**  
**September 9, 2018**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1445 Words**

**Lessons:     **Isaiah 35:4-7a****  
****Psalm 146****  
****James 2:1-17****  
****Mark 7:24-37****

“Jesus went away to the region of Tyre.” It is hard to say if he was wanting a little rest from the constant demands of healing the sick and mentally ill or if he was ducking out of sight from King Herod Antipas who had already beheaded Jesus’ cousin and was now looking for him. Probably it was a little bit of both. According to St. Mark all we know is that Jesus did not want *anyone* to know he was there.

No sooner had Jesus arrived in this beautiful city-by-the-sea than a local woman shows up and begs for just one more miracle. There is no rest for the weary. The conversation that ensues takes our breath away. Jesus definitely does not seem like the kind of man who calls a woman a dog. Maybe there is something else going on here. I think there is.

Take a moment to imagine your favorite island paradise. Conjure up in your mind an image of the perfect seaside retreat...

Let me help with words from the prophet, Ezekiel, about the City of Tyre. He described that island-city as if it were a majestic ship in the harbor of Lebanon.

“Your (city’s) borders are in the heart of the seas; your builders made perfect your beauty. They made all your planks from fir trees...they took a cedar from Lebanon to make a mast for you. ...they made your deck of pines from the coasts of Cyprus, inlaid with ivory. Of fine embroidered linen from Egypt was your sail...blue and purple from the coasts of Elishah was your awning.”

A *partial* list of products flowing into that glorious city, and named by Ezekiel, include the following: silver, gold, and vessels of bronze; ivory tusks and ebony wood; fine linens and white wool; coral, rubies, and precious stones of every kind; honey, oil, and the very best spices and wines.<sup>1</sup>

Ezekiel predicts doom for those wealthy people. *His* city of Jerusalem and *his* country of Judah have already been destroyed, and Ezekiel foretells the same fate upon the privileged, Syrophenicians from the City of Tyre.

The prophet, Zechariah, describes the streets of Tyre as *covered* in gold and silver. (Until) “the Lord strips away the city’s possessions and hurls its wealth into the sea.”<sup>2</sup>

The prophet, Isaiah, likewise has harsh words for Tyre. He predicts that these honored global traders will be ruined. He prophesies that the city’s wealth “will (no longer) be...hoarded, but... *instead* will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who live in the presence of the Lord, (i.e. the Jews).”<sup>3</sup>

The prophets, Jeremiah and Amos, also predict punishment for these people. “Those who devour and plunder *shall be* devoured and plundered.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel chapter 27 is one of three oracles spoken against Tyre by the prophet.

<sup>2</sup> Zechariah 9:3-4

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 23:18

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 30:16

A couple of hundred years later the prophet, Joel, imagines a Day of Judgment for the SyroPhoenicians because they have exploited the weak and broken people of Judah and Jerusalem. Joel envisions the LORD punishing them for taking all the gold and silver of for *their* temples. Joel sees the LORD holding them accountable for selling the men and women of Judah and Jerusalem into slavery.

Bottom line: These Gentiles have had their way. For a long time, their incredible fortunes *improved* at the expense of the Jews. These SyroPhoenicians were people of a different nation, race, culture, religion, and economy. To be perfectly clear, the ancestors of the SyroPhoenician woman in today's Gospel sold the ancestors of Jesus as slaves.

And so, now, we can rejoin the scene unfolding in today's Gospel as the Jew who is minding his own business gets interrupted. The Jew who is not causing any trouble gets interrupted. The Jew who was just hoping for a little peace and quiet gets interrupted.

Now, Jesus has crossed all those boundaries—of nation, race, culture, religion, and economics when he arrived in Tyre. And then, this woman crossed all those same boundaries—of nation, race, culture, religion, economics (and gender) when she asks him for a favor.

The closest metaphor we could imagine for this story of Jesus and the SyroPhoenician woman would be a parable in which a poor, black man from a small village in a West African country shows up in the City of Charleston. It would be a parable in which this man of an entirely different culture and religion is walking through the slave market, remembering *his* peoples' *un*fortunate history in that place. It would be a parable in which this man continues walking down the street into a neighborhood of multimillion-dollar homes, just minding his own business. It would be a parable in which this poor foreigner, wanting a little peace and quiet, gets interrupted by a wealthy, white woman who is fortunate enough to own a home there.

“I need your help!” she says.

Well, I know what I would say if I was in that man's shoes. I would probably say something like this: “Your people have had my peoples' help for the last 400 years. And it looks to me like y'all are doing just fine. On the other hand, my people definitely need help.”

Jesus actually said something quite similar to this. He said, (Quote) “Let the children (of Israel) be fed *first*, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

After studying this passage and the historical context of this encounter between Jesus and the SyroPhoenician woman, I do *not* believe he was making a *personal* insult against *her*. I believe he was making a prophetic, political statement about the fact that it was Children of Israel's turn to be fed *for a change*.

Jesus was not boasting from a position of arrogant superiority; he was complaining—like every single one of those Jewish prophets—from a position of inferiority. When it comes to Jesus, we know that put downs are not his style...*except* when he challenges proud, entitled, hypocrites and bullies.

So in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus challenges a Gentile living in an earthly 'paradise' not to just *assume* that she deserves to get everything *she* wants, and that *he*—the Jew—is supposed to jump and fetch as if their sole purpose is to serve the SyroPhoenicians.

The *bad* news in today's Gospel story is that entitled people should expect to be challenged by Jesus. A wise teacher once told me, “If you don't feel personally challenged by Jesus, then you are ignoring him.” All of us Gentiles in the Church need to take this to heart and remember it.

The Good News in today's Gospel is that all sorts and conditions of men and women have real needs that will make us bow down and beg for help. In desperate straits, every one of us is prepared to seek help across every imaginable boundary—national, racial, cultural, religious, economic, and gender—just as it happened in today's Gospel story. Thus, we can *also* recognize that this is true for every other person in the world.

The *best* news of today's Gospel story is that Jesus not only opened the woman's eyes to her own privilege; he nonetheless provided the help her daughter so desperately needed. And so this Gentile was blessed with her daughter's healing; and she was *also blessed* with a Christ example to follow in her *own life*, using *her* gifts in service to others in need.

I like to imagine that woman's daughter hearing this story from her mom, and years later, traveling down the road to Jerusalem and wandering into a congregation with James, the brother of Jesus. Imagine her showing up with gold rings and fine clothes, and being *astonished* at the favoritism people are showing her. Imagine her speaking out with James to challenge the followers of Jesus to pay *at least* as much attention to the poor person in dirty clothes.

She knows better because her momma taught her that Jesus Christ makes *no* distinctions and shows no partiality. She knows Jesus Christ crosses every man-made boundary imaginable to show us how to love our neighbors, even the privileged Syrophenician ones. She knows all this because Jesus saved *her* life...just like he saves ours.

St. James wrote these words: "Faith, *by itself*, if it has no works, is dead." He's right. We have seen the faith of Christ by seeing the works of Christ. And these Christian works are no different for *us Gentiles* than they were for the Syrophenician Gentiles.

They are the *most* challenging example of mercy imaginable...and we are expected to follow this example...in Jesus' name.

Amen.