

**Yr. B, Proper 18**  
**September 5, 2021**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1507 Words**

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

The purpose-driven life of Jesus is crystal clear, from the moment he first stood up as a young man and read Isaiah's prophesy in his hometown synagogue. Jesus boldly proclaimed, from the beginning, that he, himself, was the one...*the One* to bring good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the announcement of the LORD's favor for *all people*.

You can read about it in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, but the 'Cliff Notes' version of Jesus' visionary purpose is also tucked into Psalm 146, which we just prayed:

“Praise the LORD, O my soul! Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, (and) food to those who hunger, (and) freedom to prisoners, (and) sight to the blind, a helping hand to those who are down, welcome to the immigrant (stranger), and support for widows and orphans.”

So what happened in *today's Gospel*? Did Jesus choke? Did he have a bad day? Was he upset because she interrupted his anonymous vacation at the coast? *How could he possibly say to the woman*, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”?

Remember that Isaiah's prophesy—Jesus' *own* visionary purpose—(it) did not place *any limits* upon the mercy of God *or* his only Son. Our Psalm does not set *any parameters* for the LORD, “the Maker of heaven and (the whole) earth...”

Please remember that Jesus had already erased the boundary between Jew and Gentile when he first spoke up in his synagogue. In fact, Jesus actually indicated a Divine preference for showing mercy to *outsiders*, to gentiles.

“God sent relief to the widow in Sidon *instead of* the widows of Israel,” Jesus said. “God healed the Syrian leper *instead of* the lepers of Israel,” Jesus proclaimed. So, how can he now say to *this gentile woman*, “It is not fair to take the children of Israel's food and throw it to the dogs.”?

Most of you know that writing is an important part of how I practice ministry, and most of you who write know that good editing is essential to good writing. Well, if I had been a friend of St. Mark, the evangelist, and invited to edit his Gospel, I would have cut this sentence out of today's lesson! It definitely would *not* have been in the final draft.

After all, we want the readers to give Jesus credit for the miracle he actually *did*, not get distracted—as we are right now--about the strange thing he *said*. At the end of the day, Jesus *still* performs the healing miracle for the child.

No, that's not right. It was *not* at the end of the day when the healing occurred; it was immediate! Jesus actually says to the mother, “You may go—the demon *has left*...your daughter.” Notice the past tense. Jesus already healed that child from a distance, perhaps before he even spoke the challenging words to her mother.

So, why *does* Jesus say those problematic words: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”?

I mean, it seems that these words directly contradict what Jesus had already preached to *his Jewish neighbors* back in Nazareth—about God’s priority for the gentile widow *over* the Jewish widows, and about God’s preference for the gentile leper *ahead of* the Jewish lepers.

Jesus’ shocking words to this Syrophenician woman *also* contradict what he had *already done*. Two chapters earlier, St. Mark recorded how Jesus *already healed a gentile*—the Gerasene Demoniac—without the slightest hesitation.

The most plausible analysis I have read about this strange encounter from today’s Gospel makes note of the fact that there were many wealthy gentiles in the region of Tyre, *and also* poor Jewish peasants living there alongside them. You might say those poor Jewish peasants were scrounging for ‘the crumbs under the table’ in that gentile economy.

So, while Jesus healed the daughter; he *also helped the mother to see* what it is like ‘under the table.’ Maybe *she was also healed*...of the kind of blindness that easily infects those who live with privileges that other people *do not have*.

See, when you have a seat at the table, it is *so easy* to overlook those who do not. That was true for 1<sup>st</sup> century Syrophenicians living in the region of Tyre. It was also true for 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews living in the region of Nazareth. It is *still true* for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians living on the eastside of Greenville.

When we are seated *at the table*, it is so easy to *not see* those who are scrounging *under the table*.

And so, we need these words of Jesus to *challenge us* to see. We need these words of Jesus to heal *our blindness*...and our ignorance of what it’s like to scrounge for crumbs under the table.

Thank goodness I was not alive back then, and invited to edit Mark’s Gospel. Thank goodness I was not tempted to cut out the challenging words of Jesus to the Syrophenician woman. I might have painted a more flattering picture of Jesus, but I would have gutted the challenge of his words which may have healed her blindness—*and which continue to heal our blindness*.

When we think about it this way, we can see that Jesus’ challenging words to the Syrophenician woman *do not* contradict his earlier challenging words to his Jewish neighbors in Nazareth; both sets of words further Jesus’ purpose—healing the sick AND giving sight to the blind!

When Jesus infuriated *his neighbors* in Nazareth by saying that God skipped over the widows of Israel to heal the gentile widow, he was challenging them to take a long hard look *under the table*. When Jesus told his fellow Jews how God ignored the lepers in their own country and *instead* healed the gentile leper, he was challenging them to see their own sense of entitlement *at the table*. When Jesus told this woman that the children (of Israel) should be fed first, he was challenging her to see that the poor Jewish peasants in *her land* were scrounging for crumbs.

This blindness, it was like a pandemic—it was everywhere...among the Jews in Nazareth...among the gentiles in the Region of Tyre and Sidon. It was particularly infectious among the ‘*most religious*’ people in Jerusalem, and Jesus named it—out loud, every time, everywhere he went...because the people with a seat at the table needed to hear these challenging words.

And we *still need Jesus* to challenge our blindness. Don’t expect to be deeply challenged by your favorite politicians. Don’t expect to be deeply challenged by your favorite commentators. You may not even be challenged enough by your favorite religious leaders.

We all need the shocking, uncomfortably challenging words of Jesus in this individualistic culture which not only accepts privilege as a given, but celebrates it grotesquely...and defends it, sometimes violently. Those of us with a seat *at the table* desperately need Jesus to push us to see the people scrounging for crumbs *under the table*.

I wish it were *not* the case, but the more religious we are, the more difficult and dangerous this blindness can become. I think I've told you about the bumper sticker which reads, "Jesus loves you...but I'm his favorite." (Pause for laughter.)

You see, *non*-religious people—they don't think that's funny. Looking from the 'outside-in' they see that kind of attitude *for real*...all the time; they find it obnoxious; and they want no part of it...or us.

Well, there is more hard and challenging news we need to hear. Suffering, sickness, and death—these are the great equalizers. They do not respect any person...or bank account...or ancestry...or nation...or religion. Sickness did not respect the widows in Israel during the time of Elijah. Suffering did not respect the Jewish lepers during the time of Elisha. Illness did not respect the daughter of the Syrophenician woman during the time of Jesus.

And nothing has changed. Suffering, sickness, and death still bring us to our knees. We *still* bow down at the feet of Jesus and pray, "Lord, have mercy." We *still* bow down in our distress and beg, "Lord, hear our prayer." Oftentimes, we experience some kind of grace or mercy which helps us (and those we love) to carry on.

And...if we are fortunate, we also open our eyes to see what *can be seen* much more easily when we are laid low. That is when we can see *under the table*...where the crumbs are...where the scrounging takes place. Maybe it is the place we discover empathy and compassion.

May God bless us with the healing we desperately want for ourselves and those we love. And may Christ *also bless us* by healing our blindness which we *also need*...so that we can see the needs of others...and also see ourselves as living partners in Christ's healing and saving purpose for all people, everywhere.

Amen.